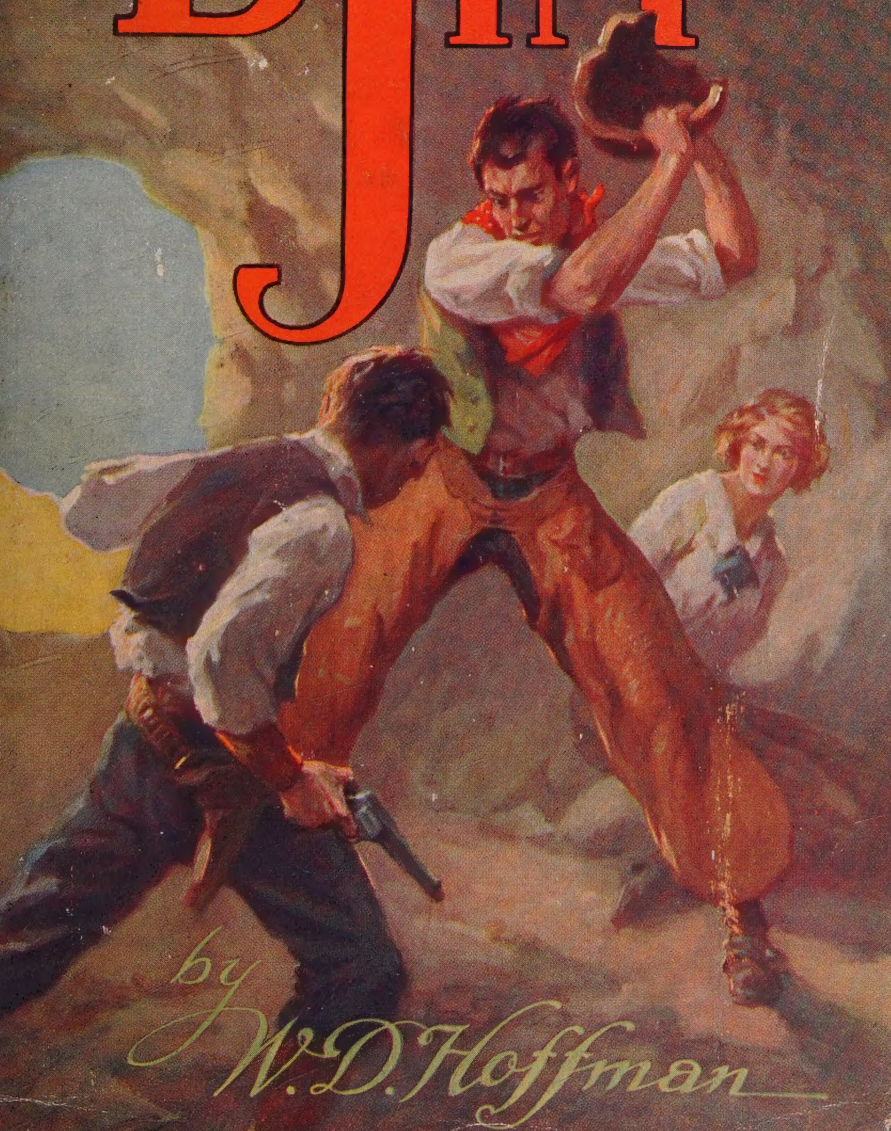


BRAVO JIM



by
W.D. Hoffman

Bravo Jim

By W. D. HOFFMAN

Author of

GUN GOSPEL

WESTWARD TO PARADISE, Etc.


Bootleggers, hi-jackers, gunmen, smugglers, the bad men of the Twentieth Century, — all these are a part of BRAVO JIM, a story of the West as it is today. With his marvelous power of description, Hoffman fills our nostrils with the smell of burning gunpowder, he envelops us with the dust of flying hoofs and fleeing automobiles, he makes our blood tingle with the thrill of the chase.

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We are presented with an entirely new aspect of the famous "wild and woolly" range country, an aspect that is stimulating and refreshing.

A. L. BURT COMPANY
Publishers - New York

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List of Fiction*



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By W. D. HOFFMAN

AUTHOR of

"Gun Gospel," "The Man from El Paso," "Knights of the Desert," "Westward to Paradise," etc.



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CONTENTS

| | |
|------------------------------------|-----|
| MOON MESA | 1 |
| A STRANGER IN CHAMIZAL | 14 |
| REAWAKENED SUSPICIONS | 30 |
| IN JAIL AND OUT | 39 |
| A HECTIC NIGHT | 51 |
| CLOVEN-HOOF DECOYS | 64 |
| FIESTA DAY | 78 |
| "BRAVO'S A SINGLE MAN" | 90 |
| A DERELICT FROM THE CITY | 105 |
| BRAVO'S REPUTATION | 120 |
| THE NIGHT PATROL | 131 |
| THE FOE STRIKES | 144 |
| THE LAW TAKES SIDES | 152 |
| "THE COLONEL" | 165 |
| DAN SPELLMAN ENTERTAINS | 173 |
| FOR RUFUS' SAKE | 183 |
| A HARD DECISION | 193 |
| SPELLMAN EXPLAINS | 209 |
| THE CAVE IN THE CAÑON | 221 |
| THE DIARY OF A GIRL | 233 |
| UNDER THE OVERHANG | 245 |
| RUFUS DISAPPEARS | 258 |
| UGLY PROOF | 267 |
| OVER THE BORDER | 279 |
| WORDS OF JOY | 297 |
| "THERE'S MILLIONS IN IT" | 309 |
| ON THE SMUGGLER TRAIL | 322 |
| FACING THE MUSIC | 338 |
| THE RIGHT TO SPEAK | 349 |

BRAVO JIM

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CHAPTER I

Moon Mesa

A COOL, crisp night breeze came down from the moon-silvered peaks of the Organs. The man sitting before the fire tossed into the dying flames a few twigs and a root of gnarled and twisted mesquite. Thorns crackled in the blaze; a yellowish glow widened its circle about the sleeping forms of his tired companions, the horses, the black frame of the wagon, and the near fringe of the mesa.

The man smiled, at peace with the world. His nostrils drank in the rare, exhilarating air, pungent with the smell of creosote bush and young sage, intermittently freighted with the odor of wood-smoke and boiling coffee. Afar rose the dismal desert chorus of yapping coyotes, to cease suddenly with the louder cry of the great loafer wolf on the mountainside. Nearer at hand all was still but the crunching

teeth of the horses, an occasional hoof-fall, and the softer munching of the sleeping, cud-chewing bovines at the shadow's edge. The man stretched out his muscular arms, yawned drowsily. His smiling face sank low to his chest, the lids drooped over his mild brown eyes, and his fine young body relaxed in the blissful rest of one fatigued.

Only for a moment did he drowse, however. As though oncoming slumber had warned him, he rose quickly, still smiling, and poured out a tincup of sizzling coffee, which he blew and sipped and finally drank with relish. He stood gazing into the flickering flames, his eyes brightening, warmed within and without.

He walked away from the blaze, until the chill of the night wind was again upon his bronzed cheek and surging through his flannel shirt, rousing the robust body into the wakefulness of midday. Bravo Jim Calhoun threw out his shoulders, breathed deeply, turned his face to the stars, laughed silently and long. He did not know why he laughed, except that his physical being throbbed with the good feel of perfect health, of pure young blood surging from the crown of his scalp to the soles of his feet. It was sheer joy to be alive, to see the animate and inanimate objects about him, to

hear the night sounds, to scent the smoky fire, the coffee, the mesa shrubs, the smells of camp and livestock, to feel the chill weather upon his glowing flesh, the heady air within his lungs. It felt good to be tired and to contemplate rest after a long day in the saddle; it felt good to be awake, strong and refreshed, in the full vigor of manhood. Life was superb to one who had the power and the confidence to face the world and all it held in store.

He moved again to the fire, whose warmth refilled him with comfort and calm after the bestirring chill. Producing his pipe, he packed the bowl to the rim, lighted it with a burning ember, and settled back to puff tranquilly in the glow of the blaze. His mild eyes twinkled and the satisfied laugh lingered silently for long minutes upon his lips.

Even the problem he had sat up thus late to solve did not in any way depress his exuberant spirits. That day he had set a tentative figure, too high to be seriously considered by anyone, for the sale of his ranch stretching from the Rio Grande across the arid mesa and beyond the San Andreas Range. The agent who had begged him to name his price had actually considered the outlandish figure, although Bravo had purposely named a sum that would make

the deal impossible, as he thought. Fortunately he had given no definite pledge to surrender his holdings even at the high price he had mentioned.

He again laughed softly as his eyes followed the licking flames that consumed the dry mesquite. It was good to know he was richer than he had dared believe. Yet why should he surrender the rancho of the Pole Corral? This was his home, his father's before him. His herds were doing as well as the arid range would permit, with the valley hayfields to fall back upon. One urge only had tempted him—the thirst for more stirring scenes, an innate love for action and adventure. His home ranch was peaceable, tranquil, almost too uneventful for the son of old Captain Dave Calhoun, trail-blazer and pioneer. There were new realms to be conquered in Chihuahua and Sonora, illimitable plains and valleys and good grass for his herds where fences were unknown. With his young fortune, if he took the money, he could become a power even in the Argentine. A tinge of sadness came into the smiling countenance as he drew deeply upon his pipe and sought a solution for his dilemma in the red embers.

Moon Mesa beyond the yellowish glow of

the fire had gradually taken on a new aspect, a milky haze upon the ground, the tips of the cactus fringed with silver, the lacy mesquite a pattern of filigree; yucca, sotol and creosote bush standing forth like things of chiseled marble, their shadows a deep indigo on the snowy sand hummocks. Slowly the moonlight had crept downward from the steep spires of the Organs to the flat plain as the brilliant disk raised its face above the eastern skyline. Bravo Jim turned from the warm fire to look at the cold sphere, and his heart pounded strangely within him.

Moonlight, the mesa, a brisk wind—these three had always moved the range man to the depths. Many a wild night ride, inexplicable to his companions, had given faint expression to the clamoring urge for daring exploit, hazard, heroic deed thus inspired. Twice in his boyhood, once when he was five, once when he was seven, the raiders had come to the rancho of Captain Calhoun. Moonlight on the mesa always brought with it a picture of galloping horsemen, swiftly darting figures in the corrals, red jets of gunfire stabbing the night.

Those days of the long ago—and yet not so very long ago—were gone forever. Bravo Jim's brooding eyes were on the big golden

disk, his taut body holding itself in check, resisting the saddle—he was a man grown now and past the foolish, reckless age, he hoped, when he would still the restless urge by tearing over the night range in pursuit of fancied outlaw bands. His smile was grim as he recalled the youthful Ira Estes' plaint that very evening before the campfire on the drabness of a modern cowboy's life:

“Used to be when old Dona Ana was a hot-bed of sin and excitement,” Ira had droned. “Horsethieves and rustlers was plentiful, and every once in a while there was a killin’. I don’t refer to the days of Victorio and his Apache warriors neither. I mean fairly recent. Of course I was too young to be a puncher then—my fool luck to be growed up when things was all quieted down. Take the days of the longhorns, why I haven’t seen one of those critters in Dona Ana county since I was knee-high to a centerpede. Nowadays it’s white-faces and grades exclusive. Whereas it used to be customary for every waddy to go loaded against rustlers, now we’re lucky if we get a shot at a lobo. Pretty soon it’ll be a fortunate cowboy that c’n find a coyote to practice on!”

“Meaning you’d like for there to be rustlers

stealing our stock so's you could have some excitement?" Baldy Carr, foreman of the outfit, had asked. "There's old Heifer-Killer, the lobo——"

"Well, I mean it would be plumb interestin' for a change if somebody started a ruckus of some kind," complained Ira. "Now the worst thing we got to fight is screw-worm flies."

"They're devilish enough, springtime," put in Baldy. "Worse on the calf crop than cow-thieves used to be."

"But what I mean is, a cowboy's life has got to be the blamedest, deadeast existence there is," grumbled Ira. "No long drives any more—railroad takes 'em. Not even drouth to fight—when grass is short we sling cottonseed cake, or feed alfalfa hay. Even the soapweed and sotol machines are comin' in and pretty soon every waddy will be a cactus-cutter instead of a rider, not countin' the way they're fencin' everything."

Baldy Carr had laughed, his grizzled countenance merry in the fireglow. "Listen to him, Bravo. Ira was born plumb out of his time, I reckon. Take me. I'm glad of the change. Ira should been in the saddle when Pat Garrett was scrappin' the Kid, or back when Sam Bass was on the tear—or John Wesley Har-

din, or Dallas Stoudenmire, or Clay Allison, or Billy the Kid himself."

"Yea," agreed Ira, "I should. To be a waddy nowadays a feller might as well be a store clerk in town, far as anything happening goes."

Ira's plaintive words had affected Bravo Jim Calhoun more deeply than he dared admit, and now the night wind and the moon were exerting their peculiar power upon the young ranchman. The world seemed unreal, always had taken on a romantic glamor when Bravo was on the mesa under the gem-studded dome of night, and doubly so when the soft light and shadow mantled the vast tableland from the big satellite. Again he visioned the raiders, battle, the pursuit. The old adventurous blood of his sire surged through his veins. He had thought he was born under a stormy star, for the frontier was alive with conflict and hazard when his father lived. Had he not been called "Bravo" by the Captain's vaqueros because at the age of seven he joined in the pursuit and used himself in the last night raid like a man?

But the years had fled; the old Pole Corral became a prosaic, humdrum modern rancho, with little more of adventure than a stock farm of the Middle West!

The lobo's long howl sounded again from the foot of the mountain. Yielding to the spell of the night, Bravo jumped to his feet, yanked up his saddle and rifle and sped to the rope corral holding the cavvy.

He rode furiously through the eerie shrub sentinels of the mesa, forgetting he had worked circle from daybreak in his own round-up. His being sang with the zest of the hunt; he tore ahead for long minutes, his muscular thighs forked tight to the saddle, his body rhythmically matching the motion of the sturdy roan cow-pony, face uplifted in the teeth of the wind, lips parting in a wild laugh, eyes shining with exultation as they focused upon the moon. No one knew better than he the meager chances of getting within range of the lobo; he was riding to let off steam, because he could not resist a make-believe chase in his visionary world of worthy foes fit to match his prowess. He was a big overgrown boy, at play when the wind was high and the mesa was silvery with the blue-white haze of the moonlight.

The minutes fled and the hour; he had been more fortunate than he had counted in stalking the cattle-killing lobo, guided to its immediate vicinity by the prolonged call of the gaunt

thing that smelled the bovine lure to windward. His laugh was stilled; his horse was walking in sleepy deception downwind from the place of the last blood cry of the wolf summoning its mate. Wise in the ways of the killers, he traveled to hide the man-scent from the beast; he held his rifle snug against his pony's shoulder, knowing well the lobo if watching from behind a mesquite hummock would never stalk him if the weapon were in view, and there was a chance in a hundred the flitting shadow would appear otherwise. His eyes darted to the left, to the right, in front and behind. Suddenly he saw the ghost streak far in his rear. He turned in the saddle, rode with his back to the horn, rifle against his leg ready to sweep upward at the next move of the wolf.

No more the lobo howled; the rider moved in a wide circle. Midnight came and went; the moon climbed higher overhead; the cold wind swept the mesa. Old Heifer-Killer was wise, hiding his hundred and eighty pounds of merciless brawn. This was adventure! Here was a rustler! Had not the lobo and his mate slashed the life out of seventy of the fattest young she-stuff and half as many calves in the year gone by? Had not every hand on the

Pole Corral pitted his brains against the murderer? Gun, trap, poison, dogs had done their best and failed. Old Heifer-Killer possessed brains and high cunning—a foe worthy the steel of Bravo Jim even when the mesa moon called him to the restless trail.

The ranchman rode back to the roundup bedground. His adventure, though fruitless, had steadied him. The old rancho did not seem so humdrum and monotonous; he and the boys must concentrate on the stock-killer pair immediately after the calf branding. Ira's plaint was foolish; no one would wish the hectic days of this near-border region to come again.

Simmered down, the glamor of the fighting past was largely imaginary. Such happenings were usually sordid and unredeeming except when narrated at a later day and embellished with romance. True, those times had brought forth heroic figures to cope with the outlaw breed; Bravo if born in a different generation would have hurled his robust being into the fray as his father had done. But Pat Garrett lay asleep in the little graveyard at Cruces, and southern New Mexico was done with punitive measures administered outside the courtroom. There was work in plenty to be done,

achievement of a new order, even though alfalfa grew where rambling herds had grazed. The Arid Belt was still unconquered beyond the Rio Grande.

Now was a poor time to think of leaving the old rancho. Although the nights brought chill on the high mesa and mountains, spring was on the river, the season of balmy nights and re-awakened torrid days. The rancho was at the edge of the wonder valley and the desert, within sight of the Great River. Emerald alfalfa warmed and expanded in its checkered beds; white and pink sprays of peach, plum and pear scented the valley air. Along the line of the Rio Bravo the bosque greened, its willow and cane freshly robed, its newly-leaved alamo masking the pearly berries of its clinging mistletoe. Wattled jacales and brown adobes, still bedecked with crimson festoons of chilis, these and homelier things Bravo would miss if he sold the rancho—even the indolent burros, dust-coated pigs and goats, Chihuahua dogs and mongrels, capricious colts in the meadows and the bobbing sombreros of the brown-skinned natives.

There were fiesta days in which the Americano joined; diversions for the cowboys now and then, with an evening in town, a game of

cards at the bunk house, a tussle with a refractory bronco, occasionally a cowboy horse race or a gallo race. Life on the ancient rancho, modernized and tamed by the hand of progress, was not so bad.

Bravo Jim unrolled his blankets and made his bed near the edge of the campfire. The temptation to take the young fortune for the Pole Corral and to strike out into new fields had passed. He slept and dreamed of the days of old, of battle on Moon Mesa, of swarthy raiders who swept down from the mountains when the moon was overhead and the winds were high.

He did not know how nearly his dream was to be a forecast of events; how his peaceful rancho was to be transformed into a cauldron of stirring adventure—all because of the decision he had made to retain the land holdings coveted by powerful interests on the border in these enlightened days of reclamation, law and order, and the Eighteenth Amendment.

CHAPTER II

A Stranger in Chamizal

THE little shaggy coyote loped down the embankment of the muddy acequia and out into the mesquite to the desert, knowing his forays upon the friendly hen-roost of the valley could no longer be extended, for the night was all but spent. The song of the mocker gave way to the chatter of glistening black-birds and jays in the marshes; the white-winged dove and the crested quail zoomed their way to the mesa, where, under the indescribably jeweled sky, the cattle range stretched to the dawn-lit San Andreas Range and beyond, unchanged in its barren, forbidding aridity since the coming of the first gaunt herds. Day was breaking in the transient cow camp beneath the porphyry spires of the mountains.

Except for the cook and the boy Billito, horse-tender, the sleeping camp had not stirred. Gray dawn changed swiftly to faint rose, until even the dusty canvas over the wagon glowed softly with color. Splotches of white, brown

and black, all mellowed by the approaching day, lay scattered about in the chamiza and mesquite. Sombreros, chaps, boots peeped out of the bedrolls or lay clear of the tarps. Slowly a head was thrust out from its covering, a hand laid hold of a scuffed old boot, and in an instant the inoffensive bit of footwear bounded forth to a nearby cowboy's bed of ease.

While the "Battle of the Boots" lasted, the quiet cow camp became a scene of vociferous activity, with the yells, grunts and groans of the punchers, the air well filled with hurtling shoe-leather, scrolled, nickeled and unadorned. Mose Given, the new hand from Texas, alone failed to join, holding his fifty-dollar boots in too great esteem. "Naow, waddies," he drawled, rubbing a battered shin-bone from the assault, "you-all don't mean to tell me this is an every-day occurrence on this heah Pole Corral outfit? It done happened yesterday. If it be so, I reckon you-all will have to hireh a new hand."

"It only happens once a day, during branding time," grinned Baldy Carr. "And then only when the big boss himself antes in. You know who done throwed that first boot, Mose?"

The new hand cautiously gazed around toward Bravo Jim Calhoun. "I was laying

heah with one eye open, and I see him toss the first ball," he admitted, dolefully. "It's the first outfit I ever worked for, Mister Carr, where the big boss didn't care no more for discipline than Bravo Jim does. I reckon he ain't never growed up yet."

Baldy chuckled. "If Bravo growed much farther, Chamizal range wouldn't hold him scarcely. Fact is, he's getting fidgety here now—that's why he's aiming to sell out. This here alfalfa and irrigation business don't fit his ideas of a cow outfit, so he wants to hit out for new grass, grass that don't require him turning his cow waddies into farmer boys."

Bravo Jim was trudging about in his socks, with one boot in hand, and trying to locate its mate. He was all of six feet in said socks, and while not handsome, was good to look upon. He was dark, much tanned, black-haired, brown-eyed. His mouth was wide, amused-looking; his nose big and strong. His legs were both lanky and straight, in spite of years in the saddle.

"Why for they call him 'Bravo'?" the new puncher wanted to know.

"These here natives give him that handle about a dozen years ago when he was only a kid, before his dad died. Yes, sir, Bravo Jim

got that nomenclature honest enough by mixing with a band of Texas hossthieves. Rumors says he toddled out of the cradle and slung down his rifle on the kit of 'em, but that is plumb exaggerated. He was—le' me see—four or five or maybe seven and his dad had give him a twenty-two for Christmas. It was the night after Christmas the raiders swooped down from Moon Mesa to see what was in the hoss corral, if anything, and they was starting to count the cow-ponies to see if Captain Calhoun could spare a couple when they was discovered. Next thing, there was a heap of shooting, both sides, and the thieves had got down the gate and managed to run off the two hosses they had picked on, deciding at the last minute them two was all they could handle. Well, they was chased back up to the mesa and got away. When we come back and counted the stock, was the first time we knowed the two broncos was missing. About that time in comes Little Jim with them two hosses, and his twenty-two was hot and smoking. His hat was full of holes and his shirt was punctured, but he brung home the stolen stock."

Baldy's wrinkled features hardened. "Bravo Jim has been too danged easy-going lately, and some folks have been imposing on him, in lit-

tle sneaking ways. Bravo's full of fun and devilment now, of an innocent kind—but when there's work to be done, there ain't any fooling, you notice, amigo. He's a boss that's pop'lar, with whites and natives alike."

"Mex like him too, eh?"

"Look here, Mister Man from Texas. In New Mexico these hombres ain't Mex. They're native. And they got a right to be. They were here before the white man come. Jest so's you will sabe, amigo. The best families in these parts are largely native. Now having had yore morning lesson, I reckon we better eat."

Mose Given, fresh from the Lone Star state, had been learning rapidly during the week he had been attached to the Pole Corral. And with each successive revelation, he had marked down his new boss as a man worthy the high regard of his employes. From that hour of morning until evening, there was no more "fooling" about the work of the rancho. Bravo Jim's discipline was one hundred per cent when occasion required.

The roundup passed the Badger Buttes, High Mesa, and Puerco Hole. The last circle of the day's gather had been worked down within sight of the parada grounds of the ranch headquarters. Bravo Jim was satisfied

that few calves-at-foot had escaped; his help was adequate and every hand knew the range like an open book, to the last arroyo and rincon. So thoroughly had the range been worked that the cut had been made as the roundup moved toward the valley; bawling dogies, calves and their mothers alone remained, the infants awaiting the cross-barred brand of the Pole Corral on the morrow.

It was late afternoon on the Rio Grande, near the end of a hot May day. Bravo Jim had worked hard with his men for five days; he prepared to return to the ranch house to look after urgent duties there, leaving enough men to keep the herd bunched in the big pasture over night. His attention at the moment was attracted to a rider moving swiftly up from the valley toward the spot where the roundup rested.

The horseman was following the dusty wagon road that stretched from the river toward the Organ Mountains. As he neared, he left the road and took the open range directly toward the Pole Corral punchers and the cattle.

"He's in a hurry, bringing news, looks like," commented Baldy Carr, eyes squinting in the fading sunlight. "I declah, it's Ira!"

Ira Estes had been sent to Chamizal that

morning to bring out a few urgently needed supplies for the cook to replenish the chuck wagon larder. The pack-horse he had taken with him was not in evidence now, indicating that Ira had disregarded or forgotten the grub order in the excitement of some unexpected event.

"Things are due to happen hereabouts *muy pronto*," suggested Bravo's loyal foreman, his eyes watching the approaching rider beneath shaggy, dust-encrusted brows. "I don't like this talk, Bravo, about them Tehanners that's supposed to be coming on the Chaves place."

"There you go again," laughed the young boss. "I reckon you're prejudiced, Baldy. You're attached to the old Pole Corral and don't want to see it sold. Neither do I." Bravo Jim's clean-cut, good-humored features held a sober look in them. "I'll tell you one thing, though, Baldy. If the deal went through—and it looked as though I could not resist the fabulous price offered—I aimed to take care of you and the rest of the boys. You all would have had jobs on my new ranch, which would have been bought pronto." He ceased speaking, for the approaching Ira Estes was gesticulating, and trying to shout some word from a hundred yards away.

Bravo Jim spurred toward him at a gallop.

"Get ridin', Bravo!" yelled the fat puncher, within earshot. "With ev'ry waddy yuh can spare!" It was a plea rather than a command, though to those uninitiated in the democratic practice of the Pole Corral outfit it would have seemed incongruous for an employe to thus address his ranch-owner boss.

"Now what's up?" demanded Bravo Jim. He turned quickly to Baldy, knowing that Ira was not given to false alarms. "Bring all the boys you can spare," he shot out, hastily. The foreman wheeled, rode back at a gallop.

Ira Estes had drawn up to a short halt. "Recollect that putty-face real-estater, Bravo? He's just killed Half-Wit Charlie, and shot Juan Escajeda! He ain't a real-estater, but a killer! He's headed down the valley—struck out for Chamberino!"

The news was indeed startling, doubly sensational in the placid, orderly hamlet of Chamizal, whose sleepy tranquility had not been broken by a shooting for many moons. The Pole Corral cowman turned to shout an order to the racing Baldy: "Bring 'em towards Chamberino!"

Bending his mount beside that of Ira Estes, Bravo Jim rode with the rotund little cow-hand

at a tangent down the valley. He did not follow the road back to Chamizal, where the shooting had taken place, but south and west toward the distant bosque line of the river. He set an easy pace, both to spell Ira Estes' tired gray and to get further information about the crime from the pudgy cowboy.

He learned that virtually no pursuit had been given the fugitive; Constable Tony Baca was not in town when the shooting had occurred, and those who were in Chamizal were either not armed or feared the man whose deadly aim had been recounted if not exaggerated by several eye-witnesses. The slaying of Half-Wit Charlie, a harmless character about town, would not have inspired this fear, but the manner of Juan Escajeda's wounding was different. Escajeda was an old-time law officer, a deputy constable whose reputation for quick shooting was widespread.

Ira Estes had seen the happening from the doorway of the general store. He, too, had been without a gun. The thing that had impressed him most was the transformation of the "dude real-estater" into a wizard quick-draw artist. "He didn't on'y shoot Charlie and Juan, but he turned his gun on the folks at the fiesta when he rode away, and slammed

lead through the hats of Jake Opperman, Californy Mapes and Tio Cordova in a row!"

The real estate dealer who had turned gunman, a stranger in Chamizal who had given the name of Karg, had had considerable dealings with Bravo Jim since his recent arrival. It was Karg who had negotiated the pending sale of the Pole Corral to the parties from Texas.

Now that this had happened, some things were plain to Bravo Jim that were not clear before. While the cowman's suspicions had never been aroused about the tall cadaver-faced realtor, there was something about the man that was peculiar. He did not fit into the role of realty dealer, although he had set up an office and announced that he would "locate" in the valley. That action had seemed strange to the Pole Corral owner, for transfers of property around Chamizal were few and far between. Karg's physical description, and the clothes he wore, fitted almost every card sharp and faro dealer Bravo Jim had ever seen.

Long of face and cold of eye, the stranger had a way of reading the thoughts of a man whom he addressed. He was well over six feet in height, would weigh less than a hundred and fifty pounds, and was cool and col-

lected, without outward show of emotion, never laughed, never frowned. His features had the putty color of one long indoors; the countenance was heavily lined with great wrinkled gashes that gave him the cadaverous appearance that made him an unpleasant man to face. Only the flattering offer he had made for the Pole Corral had induced Bravo Jim to have dealings with him, for he had instinctively disliked the fellow.

The long black cutaway coat, for years out of date as to style, was made of the best broadcloth material, and the flat, low crowned black hat he affected helped to mark him as distinguished—set apart from others. Now that Karg had revealed his true nature, Bravo Jim recalled his first impression of the dude real estate man as a gambler.

Even then the cattleman had wondered if Karg were gambling in real estate, with his own historic old rancho as the pawn. But the price had been high enough to allay his doubts then.

“There warn’t any reason a-tall,” Ira declared, in answer to his employer’s question as to why Karg had taken the life of Half-Wit Charlie.

Yet, on second thought, he admitted there

might be a reason. Charlie, a harmless old fellow who had never done injury to a soul, had had words with Karg. The half-wit's aversion to strangers, particularly to "dudes," was pronounced. His obsession was that in his youth he had been a great Indian fighter; he would sit puffing his pipe for hours narrating how he, and not Lieutenant Gatewood, had forced the surrender of Geronimo, and out of the fancies of his imagination he would describe impossible exploits in the Lincoln county war. It was Charlie Hall and not Pat Garrett who had bagged the notorious Billy the Kid, to hear Charlie tell it.

"I reckon some uh the boys egged him on when they seed him quibblin' with Karg," admitted Ira. "That hombre didn't know Charlie was simple-minded. It made Charlie bile when that real-estater give him the ha-ha over him bein' a great Injun fighter. Yeah, I seed Charlie had a gun on him when he stops Karg acrost from the store."

"He had a gun on him, eh?" echoed Bravo Jim, frowning. That put a different aspect on the matter entirely. The cowman knew the half-witted man's weakness for boastfulness and his penchant for striking belligerent attitudes. Often Charlie had squared off in front

of citizens on slight provocation, struck a pose as a boxer. If some of the cowboys had placed a gun in Charlie's hands, the simple-minded one would make haste to show his prowess with it.

"The weepen was empty," declared Ira, heatedly, "and I misdoubts Charlie ever made a pass to draw it. All I seed was him and Karg standin' facin' each other. Charlie he made a swipe to his hip pocket—to draw out his hankychief likely, and that skunk Karg he jest ups and drills Charlie like a rattler."

Bravo Jim saw now that, pitiful as had the shooting of the inoffensive old man been, there was no Dona Ana County jury that would convict the realtor on such evidence. Even with Charlie's gun devoid of cartridges, Karg would be able to show that he feared for his life and had shot in self-defense.

"Then's when the real battle started," went on Ira. "Juan Escajeda, that always goes heeled, bein' deputy constable—and a gun-fightin' officer if ever there was one—he come a-runnin'. I heered him stop sudden in front of that real-estater and demand quiet-like for the killer to lift up his paws. Karg was standin' there, without movin' a muscle, an' his six-shooter was tucked away some'ers in his clo'es.

He didn't raise said paws a-tall. Juan he showed his teeth and comes slowly forwards, knowin' from the killer's sneerin' look that it would be a case of quick draw. Well, almost before I could see it, Juan gets his weepoon out uh his holster. But he don' use it, becose a bullet plugs him in the wing, and Juan's big old Colt goes spinnin' into the air and bangs onto the sidewalk. Karg he climbs onto the nearest hoss and tears down the street. When he reaches the picnic grounds where the fiesta crowd was millin' around account of hearin' the shots, he lets his Colt bark three times, and then's when them three headpieces was plugged to intimerdate their owners."

"Juan wasn't bad hurt, then?" queried Bravo.

"Winged some'ers—I think on'y in the arm. When I seed Karg ride, I jumped the gray, and come to get a he-bunch onto his trail."

"Who were those hombres that put Charlie up to that gun-play?" Bravo Jim wanted to know.

"Carlos and Felipe, Old Man Chaves' vaqueros. They was under the influence of mes-cal, I reckon. Nobody give chase, far as I could see."

The two riders settled down to a swift gallop, foregoing further conversation. Baldy Carr and four Pole Corral punchers were tearing over the mesa a mile or so behind, headed also for Chamberino.

Within an hour Bravo Jim and Ira Estes had reached the cottonwood and tornillo timber of the Rio Grande bosque.

"Figger we might pick up his tracks in the bosky trail?" queried Ira. "Might be he won't cross to Chamberino—I reckon he's burnin' leather for El Paso, an' won't stop till he gets there. He'll jump acrost the line to Juarez, likely, an' kiss the U. S. A. good-bye."

"I doubt he'll do that," affirmed the ranch owner. Bravo Jim knew that Karg could put up a good defense, technically, and further he would not be likely to skip the country while the sale of the Pole Corral was unsettled—a sale that the real estate man had counted upon with the arrival of Dan Spellman, buyer.

"Where's yore gun, Bravo!" demanded Ira suddenly, staring at his companion in the saddle. For the first time, he had noted the absence of belt and holster, and the cowman's hip pockets showed no protruding weapon.

"It's in the wagon," smiled Bravo. He had had no occasion for its use for some time, at

least in daylight, when not even a coyote molested the roundup.

"And me without no smoke-waggin, either!" groaned Ira. "Yuh don't mean to say yo're figgerin' on follerin' this killer without yuh have yore gun?" he demanded, incredulously.

"I reckon we can talk to him," affirmed Bravo, indifferently. He rose in the saddle, turned his roan full around. "There comes your killer now, Ira, at a jog."

It was true. The man in the long coat and the flat black hat, brim flopping rhythmically as he rode, was advancing leisurely down the trail. Bravo Jim and his range hand had made faster time than the fugitive, cutting the diagonal, and this told plainly that the mysterious Karg was in no great rush to get out of the country.

CHAPTER III

Reawakened Suspicions

BRAVO JIM and Ira had turned and started briskly toward the fugitive. Twilight was settling over the Rio Grande. Westward, El Picacho and the Massacre Mountains glowed red. Nearer at hand the verdant valley lay in pastel loveliness. Eastward, Moon Mesa and the desert shone yellow and amber. Beyond them the lofty spires of the Organs were aflame with the day's dying fire. The man in the gambler's garb slowed his mount to a walk.

The three riders all halted at once. "Which way you heading, Karg?" asked the ranchman.

The deep-lined face of Karg seemed ghastly in the twilight. His strange sea-green eyes, cold and hard, bored steadily into the dark brown orbs of the cowman. "Chamberino," he answered, easily.

"I reckon you better come with us, back to Chamizal," countered Bravo Jim, persuasively.

"Not any, Mister Calhoun." The tone was bland, but settled.

"Sorry," smiled Bravo, grimly, "but I'll have to insist that you ride back with us, and give yourself up."

The black-garbed realtor continued to appraise the young cattleman with intent, calculating stare. Without speaking after a long moment he switched the pin-point pupils of his eyes downward and across to Ira Estes. A quiet surprise registered in his gaze over the absence of weapons upon these men who obviously had come to make him a prisoner. He spoke rapidly, his lips scarce moving.

"If I thought that was a threat, Bravo Jim, I'd invite you to go to Hades. But I reckon you're only trying to *persuade* me. We've been friends, in a business way. I'm frank to say I wouldn't want to have a falling out—because you hold a club over my head on that ranch deal. You might call off negotiations and not sell the Pole Corral, in which case Dan Spellman and the other friends I represent would be disappointed." He shrugged his narrow shoulders. "So I don't figure on crossing you, Bravo Jim, *if you're open to reason.*"

"So far as our business deal is concerned,"

said the cowman, "I don't aim to use it as a club over your head. But I'm asking you to give yourself up and go back to stand trial for this killing."

Karg's gaze shifted quickly toward the slope above the river. "Your men?" he asked, sourly. "Figure there's guns enough in that bunch to take me?" Without a show of outward laughter, his meaningful eyes held a scornful look of amusement.

"Ira, go back to the boys," directed Bravo. "Tell 'em to ride to the ranch." He turned again to the fugitive. "You going to ride back with me, Karg?"

A sudden flicker of light glistened in the cold orbs of the other. "If I decline, I reckon you'll refuse to go through with the sale of your ranch?"

"No, if I refuse to sell, it'll be for another reason."

"What reason?"

"Because I'm beginning to suspect there's something crooked about the bunch that wants my property, Karg."

"Including me?"

"Might be."

A moment of tense silence followed, during which the putty hue of the fugitive's face

seemed even more sinister in the faint light. Finally Karg made a rejoinder, meant to placate the man whose signature of sale he so anxiously sought:

"I'll tell you, Bravo, why I can't go back, much as I'd like to oblige you, personally. Chamizal is three-fourths Mex——"

"You're wrong, Karg. These folks were Americans before you were born."

"New Mex, then. Mexicans in blood if not in citizenship. They hate a Texan like poison. I wouldn't last overnight in jail in Chamizal. Now I'll tell you something." His voice held a note of subdued triumph. "Reason I was headed for Chamberino was to reach a telephone—there ain't any in Chamizal. I was aiming to phone the sheriff at Cruces that I was ready to surrender and stand trial, on condition I wouldn't be jailed in Chamizal. If I was juzgadoed there, amigo, I'd be dragged out and hanged before daylight."

The young cowman saw that the argument was not without a certain force. Juan Escajeda, the wounded deputy constable, himself an individual of erratic and tricky nature, would seek revenge, and Escajeda was not without following among the rougher native element in Chamizal. Humiliated and stung to the

quick by a better man with guns than himself, Juan would burn for vengeance against Karg, and he might do exactly what the realty speculator feared—organize a band and try to take him from jail to lynch him. He would not do this openly, of course, being an officer; but he could pass the word around among his friends, remain in the background himself, and let them do the work.

Whether Karg had from the first intended to surrender, Bravo Jim did not know. This may have been a last minute thought on his part, to placate the cowman on seeing the latter's determination. Or he may have intended to give himself up to the sheriff, not wanting to skip the country before receiving his ranch deal commission. He could count upon giving bond and being at liberty pending trial, knowing that he would have a fair case, legally.

Bravo Jim made a promise: "Come with me, Karg, to Chamizal. If you can't arrange bond with the justice of the peace this evening, and have to spend the night in jail, I'll see that you are given protection."

Karg shrugged. Newcomer in Chamizal though he was, he realized Bravo Jim's power in the community, his influence with natives and whites alike.

It was not as a partisan of the slayer that the cowman was acting. Bravo's impression now was that Karg was an evil-doer, of doubtful antecedents and even more doubtful motives in Chamizal. Yet, even though Karg should prove to be a notorious killer with a reputation elsewhere, he was entitled to a fair trial by jury. The day of lynch law was past on the Rio Grande.

"I haven't forgotten what happened to Baca at Socorro," remarked the sinister man on horseback. "He was promised a fair trial, too."

"But Baca was a native, and his lynchers were whites," commented Bravo Jim. "I don't reckon the natives will try to hang a Texan. And if they have any such notion, I believe I can persuade them otherwise. In fact, I'll guarantee it. We're losing time. You intend to go along?"

"I'll go—on the strength of your promise, Bravo Jim." The fugitive, now a prisoner, turned his horse, and without more words the ride up the valley began.

The cowman had not taken the man's gun, nor did he attempt to do so now. Karg would probably have resisted such a move, fearing a mob of natives on his entry into Chamizal.

But Bravo Jim intended to take the lethal weapon from the prisoner before he was lodged in the little adobe jail this night.

Darkness had settled. The early evening was moonless, balmy, still. Ira Estes had reached Baldy, the foreman, with the order to take the Pole Corral punchers back to the rancho, and there was no evidence of any other band of men hunting the slayer of the simple-minded Charlie Hall.

In the darkness the black-garbed prisoner, riding, as it happened, a dusky dun pony, was scarcely visible. Presently he began to throw out feelers as to the ranch owner's attitude on the pending sale. Bravo Jim's words of suspicion about Karg's motives had not been lost upon the prisoner.

"You was talking back there like you might have a notion to back out," said Karg, in his expressionless voice.

"I haven't signed anything, Karg," affirmed the cowman. "I'm still a free agent."

"Yeah." The man's tone was chill. "But I'm counting on that deal, and this trouble makes it more important than ever that the sale goes through. If this shooting scrape is going to make you change your mind, I'd like to know it," he added, grimly. "Now."

"If I reconsider, Karg, it won't be on account of this scrape—unless it's indirectly that. I intend to look into the matter of these purchasers a little more closely now—I'll admit," he informed, frankly.

"They're responsible men. Dan Spellman stands high on the border—and he's got the cash. He's on the way now, with his beef herd, coming up from the Pecos. Ought to be here by morning. He goes on the Chaves lease, of course, but he's counting on the Pole Corral range, too. That's why I don't expect you to back-trail on this deal now, Bravo Jim. You said something about me influencing you, indirectly, maybe. That means you're suspicious of me, amigo?"

"A little," said the cowman, pleasantly. "We-all doubted you was a genuine realty dealer, a plain business man, when you came into Chamizal a few weeks ago. You don't exactly look the role, Karg. Folks marked you down for a gambler when you first hit town. Then you turn out to be a gun artist. I'm not so sure I want to do business with this gang you represent."

In the gloom of the valley trail Bravo Jim felt the peculiar hard eyes of the man upon him, and he sensed that the black-garbed figure

had stiffened menacingly in the saddle.

"A gambler," said Karg, after a time.
"You don't mean to insinuate my dealings
ain't on the level, amigo?"

"I intend to find out."

CHAPTER IV

In Jail and Out

THERE was a long interval of silence, during which only the soft plop-plop of horses' hoofs in sand and the chuff of saddle leather broke the night's stillness. The prisoner's cadaverous countenance was all but invisible, but his head was turned straight up-trail, as though he were considering his own status in the light of Bravo Jim's reawakened suspicions.

Presently the man in black broke silence. "A gambler, eh?" he said, harshly. "Yeah, I'm a gambler. A land gambler. No use hiding it, Bravo Jim. We're offering you a fancy figure—more than you ever dreamed of getting. Why? Because we're counting on the Elephant Butte dam to let us out of the hole—later on."

"There's mighty little of my rancho acreage signed up, Karg."

"We know it. But there's enough. If I'm a gambler, I'm not the only one. When Texas

and New Mexico outlawed faro and monte, Uncle Sam put in a gambling game with stakes that made the old-time layouts mere pikers."

Bravo Jim was silent, let Karg elucidate.

"I'm meaning this Reclamation Service layout. Here's a desert. Land without water's worth a dollar an acre down—ten dollars maybe right along the Rio. The land gamblers—yeah, I'm one of 'em—buy up the acreage at say, to be liberal, ten an acre. They howl for a dam, and boom her up in Washington. Along comes Uncle Sam and does the work—surveys to pouring the concrete. Land's worth fifty to a hundred that minute! Who gets the difference?"

Bravo Jim smiled grimly; he saw vaguely what Karg was driving at.

"The gamblers," went on the frank speculator. "The pot was millions. Enough to pay for the dam ten times over. But do the big stakes go to pay for the dam? Nada! Who pays?"

"Who?"

"The sucker the gambler short-carded in the first place—the hombre that paid the speculators the millions—the hombre that farms the land! He not only lays down fifty or a hundred an acre to the gambler, but he contracts

with Uncle Sam to pay for the dam that made the gambler his cut in the first place! Signs up to pay for the dam in ten years! Can you beat it?"

"What's the point in all this, Karg?"

"Point's this: I'm gambling on your land being worth as much as I'm offering, after the water comes. I'm long-sighted. And you can't get another hombre anywhere that'll equal my figure."

Bravo Jim knew this last was the truth; yet Karg had lied when he had said he was speculating merely on the rise in value of the rancho lands. The acreage signed for water was meager—a scant eighty. Karg had offered seventy-five thousand dollars. The price was outlandish, considering that the remainder of the Pole Corral was arid forage land, some of it not worth a dollar an acre.

The man who boasted he was a land gambler had outdone himself; he had convinced Bravo Jim there was something crooked about the high offer made for the Pole Corral. The cowman was certain that other considerations than the Elephant Butte dam had led to the big bid for the rancho.

"I'll give you my final answer tomorrow, Karg," said the cowman, pleasantly.

"You've already said seventy-five thousand would be satisfactory," warned the speculator, again in his chill, sinister tones.

"Satisfactory, so far as price goes. But not signed. I aim to look into some things a little further." Bravo Jim changed the subject, as they neared the outskirts of the adobe hamlet of Chamizal. "I reckon your fears of a mob were unfounded, Karg."

There was no evidence of the excitement of the afternoon. There were lights at the little church, but the street was dark and deserted. The fiesta celebration had ended until the morrow.

The pair rode around to the home of Justice of the Peace Nat Ingalls. It was too late to hold a preliminary hearing until morning.

"This prisoner wasn't willing to trust himself in the Chamizal jail overnight," the cowman told the crippled little justice. "I've guaranteed him protection. Where's Juan Escajeda?"

"He rode off to Cruces to notify the sheriff."

"Good. Things are safe enough with Juan gone, and they'll be safe when the sheriff comes. You've got a key to the jail, Judge?"

Ingalls nodded. Bravo Jim turned to the prisoner. "I'll go down with you. You'll be

secure until morning, then you'll have your preliminary and no doubt your wealthy friends will raise bond." The cowman took the proffered keys from the justice. He cautioned Ingalls to keep this visit secret. "You haven't got a six-shooter, have you, Judge? I aim to see that Mr. Karg is not interfered with."

Ingalls hobbled back into the kitchen and produced a loaded forty-five, with a handful of extra cartridges. These the cowman took with thanks.

"While I think of it, Judge," said Bravo Jim, "you've pioneered through all west Texas. Did you ever cross the trail of a cattleman named Dan Spellman—he's wealthy now, I believe—has lands, cattle and mines scattered all around both sides of the border."

Nat Ingalls laughed bitterly. "Know him? I ought to. He swindled me out of my interest in the Madera Lumber mills. Biggest thief in ten states. Crookeder than a sidewinder's trail. Owns half of Juarez's dance-halls and cantinas—that's enough."

Bravo Jim turned away, plunged in thought. He motioned Karg to accompany him. Beside the darkened fence they mounted and the cowman took the back-lot route toward the quiet, darkened little town jail.

Before the low flat-roofed adobe, containing one lone heavily-barred window and thick, iron-studded door, the pair halted. "I'll take your horse—the one your borrowed today in your hurry to get away—so it won't be known you're here," informed the Pole Corral owner.

"That crippled judge will keep his mouth shut, will he?"

"He promised not to say a word." Bravo Jim squared around in the saddle before dismounting to unlock the door, and faced the speculator.

"Before I leave you, Karg, and so there won't be any misunderstanding—so you won't think you're trading your liberty on a promise of mine to go through with this ranch sale—I'll tell you I've made my decision. Not so much what I've found out today about yourself, as what I've just learned about Spellman, your big client." He spaced his words evenly. "The Pole Corral deal is off."

In the faint starlight, the cowman saw the dark figure of Karg tense, crouch slightly forward in the saddle. From the man's ashen lips came a subdued, sinister flood of profane, denunciatory words. But he recovered his customary cold calm quickly. He continued to

sit on his horse rigidly, and his voice was frosty and menacing:

"No Bravo Jim, you ain't going to back out — *now*."

"I've told you, Karg, fairly. The deal's off."

"No, hombre, the deal goes through."

The cowman laughed lightly. "Seems like it was up to the owner to say whether he'll sell or not, Karg."

"You'll sell."

"Wrong again, Mister Real Estate Man."

The ghastly face of Karg seemed even more deathlike in the starglow. "When a man fixes his price with Anton Karg, it's just the same as laying his bet on the table in Anton Karg's game. He don't lift his chips till the hand's drawn."

"I don't reckon anything can be gained by argument, Karg," affirmed Bravo Jim, easily. "The price was high—too high. There's something crooked in this deal—and when I sit in a crooked game and find it out I don't abide by the cards."

"If I told you that men have died for pulling their chips in Anton Karg's game, what would you say to that, Bravo Jim?"

The cowman met the chill eyes evenly.

"That a threat, Gambler Man?"

"Take it thataway if you want to, Jim Calhoun."

"Then my answer'd be short and sweet. Come a-smokin'."

A tense instant of silence. The ranchman broke it: "Now, Karg, it's lock-up time. I'll trouble you for your gun. Unbuckle your belt and hand it over, please, holster and all." Bravo Jim's keen eyes were on the prisoner's middle, visible dimly in the faint light.

He was not wholly unprepared for what happened now. A showdown with guns he did not want at this time, though the Colt forty-five borrowed from Judge Ingalls was a counterpart of the model with which he was thoroughly familiar. Karg was his prisoner, and as such was under his protection. Thus it was that when Bravo Jim's alert eyes caught the downward swipe of the gambler's hand—not to his belt to unbuckle it as commanded, but to his gaping holster instead—the cowman did not go for his own weapon jutting from the front right pocket of his chaps.

His glance caught a glint of steel, and his ears recorded on the instant the faint backward click of the hammer as Karg's gun was cocked. Bravo Jim flopped from the saddle on

the off side of the roan. With the agility of a cat his lithe figure dipped under the animal's belly and leaped outward at the sinister figure on the dun. A quick thrust with a muscled fist struck bone—the killer's wrist—and the faintly gleaming weapon was jolted from the hand of Karg.

Followed a crash of two lean, wolf-like bodies, colliding, sprawling, tearing at each other in the shadows cast by the adobe. Silently, without a sound except for the straining of agile forms upon the ground, the two men grappled in a struggle of life and death; Karg bent on murder, Bravo Jim striving to subdue the one who had changed his mind about going to jail in Chamizal.

The man of the range with a terrific short jab to the jaw broke the dog-grip of the other's biting teeth in his shoulder. Bravo Jim's work-hardened fingers closed on the gambler's throat.

The struggle had been short, for tough as Anton Karg proved to be physically—surprisingly so for one who lived by his wits and gun alone—he was no match for the young range boss to whom cattle and horse handling was part of every day's routine. The cowman lifted him to his feet and with his hefty fingers

gripping the other's collar, pulled him toward the adobe door, turned the key with his free hand, and then released his grip.

"You made a mistake that time, Karg," said Bravo Jim, easily. "Showed that you've got the killer heart. You've only proved I was right in turning down your business proposition. Now make yourself at home for the night." The cowman swept him back into the untenanted dark room. "You don't deserve it, I reckon, but I'm holding to my promise to protect you and will keep a still tongue about your capture until time for court."

The prisoner was breathing heavily; he uttered jerky, panting words of defiance:

"I'll come clear in this trial, Bravo! When I do—I'll come a-gunning. There's only one thing will save you, Jim Calhoun. Change your mind—in the morning—and sign the papers when Dan Spellman comes. You tricked me this time, damn you! You've never seen a real gun-fighter in action. You'll see—yet. Unless you play the hand you drewed! Unless you make good your promise, *and sign for the Pole Corral!*"

"No promise was ever made, Krag. I'll sign when the Rio Bravo freezes over. Good-night!" The lanky cowman yanked shut the

heavy door, turned the key, and rode up across the open space in the darkness to the home of the justice of the peace, where he left the key under the front door, as previously arranged.

He led the borrowed dun horse back through the Rio Grande bottoms and secured it to a cottonwood, where it would be discovered in the morning, when he was satisfied danger of a hostile outbreak against the killer would be over, with the justice trial about to be held.

He remained close at hand for several hours, long after the last straggler had gone to bed. With Judge Ingall's home in darkness and no one else in town conversant with the events of the evening, he was satisfied Karg would not be molested. Yet he remained in the shadows of the carrizo and willows of the irrigation canal watching the center of town until Juan Escajeda arrived with the sheriff and two deputies at midnight.

The little posse halted only long enough to go into the town corral to change a horse, then started south. It was Escajeda who had dismounted to unsaddle a lame mount for a fresh one. Bravo Jim had moved up behind the corral and in the light of a lantern he was surprised to see that both of the deputy's hands were free and unbandaged. The dexterity

with which Escajeda used both hands in re-saddling told that he had been wounded only slightly, if at all, when Anton Karg's bullet had disarmed him.

As the officer quartet disappeared in the darkness in supposed pursuit of the fugitive toward Chamberino, Bravo Jim Calhoun smiled in satisfaction. His plan of secreting the prisoner had worked. He started for home, the modest ranch house at the foot of Moon Mesa, four miles above town.

He did not return to the roundup camp, for he had expected to go to ranch headquarters anyway that evening, to see his mother and sister, and return to the camp in time for the branding in the morning. It was near 1 o'clock when he arrived, and being tired he rolled in to get a few hours' sleep.

He was awakened some time later by being heartily shaken and hearing Ira Estes' shrill voice:

"Get up, Bravo, quick! Mob's runnin' wild in Chamizal! They was streakin' for the jail to get that real-estater when I left half a hour ago. Course it'll be too late to see the hangin' now, but I figgered I'd better wake yuh up because it was you that put that hombre in the hoosgado!"

CHAPTER V

A Hectic Night

BRAVO JIM bounded from his blankets and started to pull on his clothes. Anger and alarm seized him. If Karg were lynched (possibly it was all over by now), he felt that he would be responsible, for he had pledged himself that this thing would not happen. "Where were you, Ira?" he demanded, hastily, drawing on his boots. "How'd you happen to be in town, and how'd you know it was me that put him in jail!"

"I jest got in town in time to see it," panted the rotund cowboy. "Got scared that hombre might uh shot yuh, after you never showed up either at camp or the ranch. So Baldy he sent me down to hunt yuh up. That was 'bout 10 o'clock when I started." Ira tracked after his employer, now speeding out of the doorway toward the horse corral.

"I hunted up and down the river," Ira went on, "but couldn't find yore dead body nowhere, so I concludes that gent didn't shoot yuh after

all, even if yuh wasn't heeled. I tracks into Chamizal little over half a hour ago, and there I sees ——"

"Go on; talk fast!" broke in Bravo Jim, climbing upon the buckskin he had just saddled.

"I ketches sight uh Juan Escajeda ridin' into town from Chamberino way. He cuts around the back side uh the school house toward Joe Franco's house. I follers, keepin' in the shadders, and see him get Joe out uh bed ——"

"Come on — ride!" shot out Bravo Jim, for anxious as he was to hear Ira's story, he knew not a second was to be lost. The pudgy little cowboy spurred his mount alongside the galloping buckskin Bravo had saddled. He shouted the remaining details of his experience as he rode:

"I heered Deputy Juan tell Joe Franco that killer real-estater was in jail that minute, and for Joe to wake up the town and start a lynchin'. I heered him say to Joe, says he, 'I ain't takin' part in this party because I'm a officer. When I was changin' horses in the corral,' says he, 'Chico Ortego slips me word that he seen Bravo Jim puttin' that hombre Karg into the hoosgow!'"

The ranch owner's jaw hardened. This explained how the leak had occurred. Young Chico, a ne-er-do-well youngster about town, had been a lone spectator of Karg's imprisonment. In spite of all Bravo Jim's precautions, the jail incident had been observed.

It was plain, too, why Juan Escajeda had said not a word to the sheriff and his two deputies about the imprisonment of Karg. Juan, seeking swift revenge, and knowing that the sheriff would not countenance a lynching, had ridden out of town with the little posse, deliberately to get them out of the way.

The deputy had followed with them some distance down the river in the direction of Chamberino, then, on some pretext or other, had separated from the other three and hurried back to Chamizal. After getting the town aroused, the deputy constable had galloped off again, to rejoin the sheriff, or at least to keep the officers away from Chamizal until his friends had wreaked vengeance upon the gambler-gunman.

The moon was now well over the horizon, shrouding the valley with its silvery haze. A wind had risen. As Bravo Jim set the swift pace down the dusty wagon road toward town, his eyes were alert for signs of a mob in action.

Two miles had been passed; Chamizal lay in the valley straight ahead, another two miles. If there had been a light, a body of men with lanterns or a bonfire, the glare would have been visible to the Pole Corral riders. But there was no evidence of a gathering of any kind.

This did not mean that Karg was safe. It was possible that a mob would form in the dark and carry out its business quietly and without a light. Juan Escajeda might even have cautioned Joe Franco, leader of the lynchers, to work with only a chosen few of his friends, to prevent possible interruption by the sheriff.

Another mile, and still no signs of life in Chamizal. The riders did not slacken speed, but raced downward toward the little town, reaching the first of the scattered dwellings that marked the limited boundaries of the hamlet. Not even a private home in Chamizal gave evidence of an aroused occupant; no faint glow of lamplight shone from a single window. As Bravo Jim entered the only avenue that could be dignified by the name of street, he saw that even the livery stable and garage, adjoining the town corral, where a lantern usually burned all night, was in complete darkness.

The young cowman was somewhat puzzled, and yet, he thought, the very tranquillity of the scene was ominous. If lynchers were abroad, no individual would light up his dwelling and thus indicate that he was aware of what was going on, in event of a future investigation.

Bravo Jim thought of the cottonwood grove at the edge of town on the river side. This spot in all likelihood would be selected for a "necktie party."

In his mind's eye he pictured a sinister scene under the biggest of the cottonwoods, with silent, shadowy figures at work with grim business of vengeance to exact toll for the slaying of the simple-minded Charlie Hall. This scene, he feared, was already reaching its finale, or (and this he dreaded more) it had already been staged and the actors had quietly separated and gone back to their homes, without so much as a shout or the firing of a six-shooter.

The adobe jail stood at the lower end of town. Dimly Bravo Jim saw the squat, bluish-black building in the moonlight, and he was satisfied there were no members of a mob near it. With a word to Ira Estes he led the way up the narrow street, his sole purpose to find a band of men grouped somewhere together.

His hand felt of the six-shooter in its holster at his side. He hoped he would not be required to use it; but he was determined that Karg should not be lynched if that deed had not already been done. From past experience, he hoped that his word would be respected and obeyed in Chamizal without a show of force.

Passing the darkened pool hall, he caught sight of a steeple-hatted figure on the edge of the board sidewalk. The man was propped back against a wooden post of the hitch-rack. Bravo Jim swerved, drew rein. He addressed the native. No answer. He dismounted, pulled the fellow's sunken head upward, saw by the moonlight it was Elfego Carbajal, the village "drunk." He was dead to the world, and a glance had told the ranchman that Elfego was in his usual condition, and more so, from fiesta mescal. A hurried shaking did not loosen the native's tongue, and Bravo Jim mounted again.

"By jingo, Ira, sure you haven't been hitting the bottle yourself? Must have been a ghost mob you saw!" The ranchman tore ahead, on to the end of the street, then curved off to the cottonwood grove.

"I reckon we better look fer a body hangin' to a tree," muttered the little puncher, grimly.

"Nossir, I ain't been drinkin', and I ain't sounded no false alarm!"

"You go that way; I'll take the other end," directed the cowman. He started off, riding under the cottonwoods, searching for an inanimate figure suspended to a limb. He found none. In a few minutes he rejoined Ira.

"Nope, there ain't any corpse up thataway," declared Ira. "Danged funny things is so quiet, though, after that ruckus."

Bravo Jim thought of the bosque, a mile farther west along the river. It was unlikely that a mob would take the prisoner that far away, especially when trees were nearer, and when speed was an object to avoid interference from the shriff.

The Pole Corral boss dismounted, examined the moonlit ground. He rose again to the saddle, satisfied. "If they went this way, there'd be tracks in the sand—a lot of them. There's not a mark, at least not a fresh one." He was certain of this, for a brisk wind had been blowing for some time, partially filling all old cup tracks of pony hoofs.

Bravo Jim chuckled, genuinely elated. "Must surely have been a phantom mob you saw tackling the jail, Ira! We'll go back that way and have a look at the juzgado itself. Two

to one Karg is asleep on his cot."

"I'll take yuh," grunted the puncher. "You know I wouldn't told yuh that, Bravo, for a mere lowdown josh, don't yuh know I wouldn't?"

"Good enough," grinned the cowman. "It's a cinch there hasn't been any lynching here to-night." He whirled in the saddle at sound of running feet down the board sidewalk. A dark figure at that instant disappeared between two of the box-like adobes. Bravo Jim turned his horse after the fellow, circled the buildings, but the man had dropped from sight back along the cane brakes of the acequia.

Ira Estes had ridden at the buckskin's heels, his gun in hand. "That hombre acted like a scairt rabbit!" he ejaculated. "Something's been goin' on in this man's town!"

Again they proceeded toward the jail, this time behind the street, around isolated dwellings of adobe and frame. Passing one of these, Bravo Jim saw a vague motion at the front door. He halted, noticed that the door was pushed in softly, and heard the faint sound of a turning key.

He began to feel uneasy, for this indicated that people were awake, even if no lights were showing. The occupant of the house had been

quietly watching the two riders, then had quickly got under cover. The whole atmosphere was one of dread and fear. Bravo Jim's anxiety to reach the jail increased, and he started ahead at a lope without betraying to the householder that he had heard him.

Within a few minutes the adobe lockup was approached from the rear side. All about the jail was silent as the grave. The two riders rounded the building. Ira uttered an exclamation.

"Door's standin' wide open!" he said huskily.

Without a word, his heart sinking within him, Bravo Jim stepped from the stirrups and glided to the open door. He stepped inside the darkened room and struck a match. The little flame lighted the bare, deserted interior. The lone chair was laying on its back, shattered; curved bits of glass—from a lantern globe—glistened upon the floor. Bravo Jim backed out.

"He's dead, I tell yuh!" gasped Ira. "Hung! That real-estater is dead."

"We'll find out. Ira, you ride over and wake up Judge Ingalls, and see what he knows. I'll meet you at the upper end of the street."

The cowboy loped rapidly away. The Pole

Corral owner crossed the street, rode up four or five doors to an old frame building adjoining the livery and garage, in front of which a modern gas-filling unit had been recently installed. Tom Jeffry, liveryman, slept here and was always easily aroused for night calls, Bravo knew. The ranchman hammered on the door.

There was no answer, though the cowman heard someone tiptoeing across the room in stockinged or bare feet. Bravo hammered loudly. A bedspring creaked faintly, indicating that Jeffry, too, was getting "under cover."

"Open up, Tom! It's Jim Calhoun talking," called the early morning visitor.

The liveryman bounced to the floor, and in another moment had the door open. He had not produced a light. "Come in, Bravo, pronto," whispered Jeffry. "That hombre's still roamin' 'round at large."

"What hombre?"

"Why—don't you know? That city realty man that's turned out killer. Get inside, pronto!"

But Bravo Jim did not go in. Knowing Jeffry lived near enough to the jail to have seen the events of the night even if he had not participated in the mob, he demanded to know

just what happened. "A bunch came to get him, didn't they, Tom?"

"I reckon so. Uh uh, they did. Joe Franco was leadin' them. But that hombre Karg some way sent the bunch high-tailin' for cover, and he killed Joe Franco like he would a coyote, in doin' it."

"Killed Joe," repeated the cowman, grimly. "He didn't have a gun—I took it from him when I locked him in."

"Nobody knows, scarcely, how he done it, but near as I could find out, he heard the mob comin'. When Joe unlocks the door—it was Juan gave Joe the key, as everybody knows—why, as soon as Joe goes in, that prisoner is somehow clingin' to the side of the 'dobe wall, like a cat, and he jumps right down on Joe's head, sends the lantern agin the floor—lucky it didn't explode—and in the dark he gets hold of Joe's gun. He lets Joe have his first charge of lead, and the mob runs, him firin' as he came out—but I reckon he shot over their heads because he's sure death if he wants to be. He grabs a hoss and rides.

"The mob don't have any guts, like they always don't have, but a couple of us fellers carries Joe into the pool hall. We'd no more than finished until that hombre comes ridin' in

again, and everybody ducks for home and turns out the lights. He says he's goin' to stick around the Rio till hell freezes over now and defies the sheriff or Juan Escajeda to put the cuffs on him. For the love of Pete, Bravo, don't stay out there and let him pot you in the dark!"

The cowman thanked Tom Jeffry and mounted quickly. He rode up the street to find Ira. The little puncher was waiting at the end of the thoroughfare, sitting his horse in the inky shadow of an umbrella tree.

"The judge don't know a thing," Ira declared. "Never woke all evening. I tell yuh, Bravo, that hombre is dead—plumb hanged up to a limb some'ers—*dead!*"

The words choked in his throat. In the shadows, from behind the tree trunk, came the chill, sinister voice of the killer: "Gents, raise 'em up high. Anton Karg speaking!" And although Bravo Jim had every moment since leaving Jeffry been prepared to swap lead with the mysterious land speculator, he was taken unawares now, with the bulk of Karg shielded by the bole of the tree. The gleam of a long steel six-shooter barrel was faintly visible around the edge of the umbrella tree.

The objects of the gunman's wrath slowly

obeyed his injunction. Karg stepped out into the open, and the bright moonlight revealed the ghastly, cadaverous face of the man.

"Bravo Jim," he said, in bitter, ironical tones, "I'm talking short and sweet. You've showed your snaky heart, putting a mob on me after you promised me protection, so you could draw your chips out of the land deal game without paying the price that you knew Anton Karg would exact. I was going to kill you on sight, Bravo Jim, I don't mind admitting. That's what you deserve. But I'm looking after my cut in this deal from Spellman, which is considerable. There's one way you can keep your carcass out of a hole, Calhoun—sell the Pole Corral tomorrow, and leave the Rio Grande with your stock in a week. If you fail to sign tomorrow, it's adios for you, Bravo Jim!"

"Thanks," rejoined the cowman, dryly. "You're wrong about me engineering this jail attack, and you're wasting good time waiting until tomorrow to see me sign. It won't be done——"

"Think it over," cut in the gunman, backing away in the gloom of an adobe wall, and rising to the saddle, his weapon advanced. His horse's hoofs drummed rapidly southward.

CHAPTER VI

Cloven-Hoof Decoys

AT sun-up on the high mesa between the Organs and the Franklin Mountains a trail herd from Texas moved forward in a lazy swirl of white alkali and limestone dust. The New Mexico line had been passed the day before, and the rich paradise of the Rio Bravo del Norte, shimmering green with alfalfa and barley, was in sight far ahead in that rarefied, crystal-clear atmosphere.

It was a small herd as herds go, almost no herd at all, a scant four hundred head. Gaunt and eye-burned Hereford yearling and two-year-old steers they were, precariously grazed and watered for days. They sniffed the faint trace of moisture and the indefinable aura of growing things far below, and the dust-painted hoofs and legs of the bovines moved forward with a new briskness on the verge of the promised land.

Marvelous indeed was the contrast between color-spent desert and the opulent valley of the

Great River. Arid and forbidding the mesas behind, regardless of their rare tinting of the morning hour. Passionate the hues of the sun-shafts over the level horizon, peacock-flamed the painted gorges of the Franklins and Organs, the violet slopes, the fiery spires of the pinnacles. But on the Rio Grande there was the dominant note of emerald, restful, placid, prosperity-laden green, the miracle-work of water.

Riding point, ahead of the dust smear that marked the little herd's advance, were two men whose visages would have marked them hard border-scarred adventurers. There was great contrast even between these two; the leader sleek and prosperous, stocky and robust, one who obviously had seen many well-fed years succeeding a youth of pioneering in the cattle country. The other was lean, leathery, bandy-legged, swarthy and shifty-eyed.

Dan Spellman, owner of the Double Diamond brand, recently acquired, was moving up from Texas, and he was bringing with him not only Big Olquin, his associate of less prosperous years, but also a band of fourteen riders—more than twice the number he would have any use for in handling so small a herd. This fact had not been lost on the foreman drive boss,

Olquin, but the Double Diamond owner had not been in a mood for answering questions.

Dan Spellman's florid features, ordinarily smug and cheerful, held a slight look of worry. His smoky, slate eyes, the most distinguishing mark in a vapid face, scanned the horizon line southward. He had expected a messenger at Newman, an agent who, on his instructions, had negotiated the deal for the old Chaves rancho on the Rio Grande where the Double Diamond was to find a home. Dan Spellman had never seen the place; he had made a lease with his ample funds on the word of men who knew the country and the purposes of his journey here.

"In a week we'll be settin' pretty," suggested Big Olquin, risking a feeler for information. "Bought out Old Man Chaves, didn't yuh? How much land?"

The cattleman shook his blocky head. "Leased it. For a year, with privilege of renewal. Reckon we'll make our stake in that time. There is no money in cattle any more."

"I know it." The swarthy one had agreed eagerly. He had got his first kernel of information about this drive, and he was anxious to find out more. The big boss, he had guessed from the beginning, did not seriously intend to "go

in" for cattle on the old Chaves place. Spellman had too much money, too much interest in copper and lumber in Mexico, to go piking with a few head of cattle on the Rio Grande.

Olquin waited for further enlightenment, but the border capitalist-miner-cattleman was not ready yet to lay his cards on the table. Perhaps he did not trust Olquin absolutely, although he had "used" the dusky vaquero to his advantage more than once before.

Big Olquin was not the type of man one would tie to unless there was shady work to be done. The fact that he was the son of a Kentucky father and Mexican mother was not against him; there were many fine people on the border of like extraction. Frankly called "coyotes" by their New Mexico neighbors, they were often leaders in the community. But Big Olquin's eyes were not dark like a native's—they were white man's eyes, watery blue and shifty. And in deeds if not in blood he had gone mongrel.

Nonetheless the stocky Spellman had picked him as one of his two lieutenants in this New Mexico adventure, and the border capitalist had made his money by his knowledge of human nature, and how to use it.

The day advanced. The herd, the top-heavy

remuda of a hundred head of cow-horses, the two wagons and the Texas drovers neared the benches that marked the high mesa-line. Dan Spellman's troubled gaze continued to search the desert southward for his messenger. He did not need this individual as guide exactly; Olquin was acquainted with the Rio Grande, and he knew where the Chaves rancho lay. Suddenly the Double Diamond boss halted, gazing off through the sun glare. In another moment he had called Olquin aside and motioned up his plentiful swingmen to change to point.

"I reckon that's him," he said cheerfully. Olquin was watching the puff of gray to the southward. It was not a rider they saw, but a dust-covered oblong object on wheels. As it drew near rapidly, a big desert-going automobile bore down upon them, wending its way through creosote bush and cactus, oblivious to sand hummocks and lesser obstructions.

When the white-coated car came up, two men instead of one got out. Dan Spellman drew them away from Olquin. There was a brief discussion, following which the big vaquero saw the black-bearded stranger hand his boss a folded bit of paper. Without waste of words the visitors got back into the car and started on the return El Paso-ward.

Big Olquin's sparsely-haired upper lip curved over chalky teeth. These men in the dusty touring car looked prosperous, like business men. Perhaps there had been an exchange of moneys. Associates of the kind Dan Spellman had plenty, realty men dealing in ranch properties, lands on the Pecos and timber lands in the Madera country of Mexico, copper mines at Cananea, and so forth. The paper that had been handed to Spellman looked like a bank check.

The Double Diamond boss rode now with his drive foreman behind the big remuda. His florid countenance held a more satisfied look. He turned to the breed.

"Been curious about this Rio Grande business, Olie? You know Dan Spellman can't afford to touch anything unless there's real money in it. What's your guess?"

Olquin shrugged. "It ain't my business, Mister Spellman. You and me have had dealin's before. I reckoned you wasn't goin' into cattle with this little bunch uh beeves—not even a breedin' herd. I admit I couldn't figger yo're havin' all these waddies on pay, and was wonderin' about the big hoss remootha."

"She'll all come out in time," asserted Spellman, cheerfully. "You ever heard of a man

named Bravo Jim Calhoun?"

Olquin gave a start. "Jim Calhoun," he repeated. "I knowed a hombre that name on the Pecos—deputy uh Sheriff Pat Garrett in the old days. But he's been dead more'n ten years. Must be his boy."

Dan Spellman nodded. "Bravo Jim's not over twenty-two. I never saw him. He owns the Pole Corral outfit, next to the Chaves rancho. They say he's hard."

"Hard?"

"Hard, but popular. Natives in the valley swear by him, from what I hear. Good-natured hombre, pranky, but hard to drive. I aim to buy him out."

The foreman was puzzled. "Ain't this Chaves lease enough? Thirty sections uh land." He laughed huskily. "Yuh ain't a figgerin' yuh need more range for this little bunch uh beeves, Mister Spellman?"

"I don't intend to raise cows on the Rio, Olie."

Olquin smiled crookedly. "If I was to guess, I'd say yuh might be bringin' up all these waddies to go on the rustle, Mister Spellman—like we done down on the——"

"You're wrong, Olquin."

"I know it. A man that's made his pile like

you wouldn't be likely to go into that game again, Mister Spellman."

The cattleman frowned. "There's no money in that kind of business nowadays." He reached from the saddle, extended a small bit of paper. "Cashier's check. Look at the figures."

The watery blue eyes of the half-breed bulged. "S-seventy-five thousand dollars," he said, hollowly.

"Notice whose name it's made out to?"

"Jim Calhoun," said the vaquero, slowly. "Yuh mean——?"

Dan Spellman nodded. "It's the purchase money. We need the Pole Corral holdings—*need them bad.*"

"Ain't that figger high, Mister Spellman?"

Again the cattleman nodded. "I've had my agents at work trying to get the place for a more reasonable sum. So I made it high enough to count."

"I cain't figger it," admitted the puzzled Olquin. "Elephant Butte dam's raised the value of valley land, but——"

"Bravo Jim's Pole Corral barely touches the irrigated belt," put in Spellman. "I'm not speculating in land—on this deal. We need the Pole Corral because of *La Cueva.*"

"*La Cueva?* What cave, Mister Spellman?"

"At the foot of Pyramid Peak, on Bravo Jim's ground. He doesn't know it. I doubt if there's an hombre from Las Cruces to El Paso, white or Mex, that knows The Cave. Old Victorio, the Apache, knew it, and certain friends of mine know it. We need it, amigo—bad!"

Big Olquin whistled softly. "Part uh that secret, I reckon. You kin trust me, Mister Spellman."

The cattleman's slate eyes contracted. "I aim to. There'll be work aplenty to keep all your boys busy, if this goes through easy. If not, there'll be *more* work to do."

The vaquero motioned toward the organ pipes of the distant mountains. "There's gold in them hills, Mister Spellman. I reckon this said Cave——"

"Wrong. If I was figuring on a mining deal, you don't reckon I'd bring in a bunch of cow waddies, do you? I'd bring in miners. See the point?"

"I sabe," lied the breed cheerfully. "Yeah, I give it up. But in case yuh cain't buy The Cave, Mister Spellman—what then?"

"I'll buy it. You never knew me to start anything I didn't finish, did you?"

"Nope, I didn't. But these beeves——?"

"Are merely split-hoofed decoys."

Olquin whistled, pretending to understand more than he actually did.

"I'll explain later, Olie. There'll be plenty of work for you and your Tehannos, soon as we get settled on the Rio. You sure you've picked a bunch that'll follow your lead, amigo, and no questions asked?"

"You can count on every hand, Mister Spellman."

The drive went forward steadily westward. The passing hours unfolded a scene healing to the eyes of man and beast; brimming, green-lined acequias glistening in the sun, the Great River winding golden yellow in a vale of fertile lands and ranchos, checkered acres of lush alfalfa, growth of May corn, lesser grain, cane and cottonwood. All was in strange contrast to the bleak, arid gray of the mesaland.

Midday saw distinctly the home corrals of the newly-acquired Double Diamond and beyond them the gleaming domes of the churches above the flat-roofed adobes of the villages of the Rio Grande. Towering over all were the lofty spires of the Organs, and the peaks of the San Andreas Range.

Dan Spellman watched with keenly inter-

ested gaze a rider off to the westward. For some minutes only head and shoulders had been visible over an arroyo slit in the plain, his flat black hat bobbing rhythmically with the jog of his horse.

"Who's that hombre?" Olquin wanted to know.

"He's the man on the ground. The real estate agent that put through the deal with Bravo Jim. Treat him with respect, Olie, because he happens to be my right hand man, alongside of you. He furnishes the wits; you supply the leadership in the field." Dan Spellman laughed good naturedly at his heavy joke. "Outside of doing a deal of the headwork, Anton Karg is noted for——"

"Anton Karg!" belched Olquin incredulously. "Th' pistol artist! Him in on this deal——?"

Spellman nodded, his slate eyes aflame with a new light. "Treat him with respect, Olie. All of us boys have got to work together—for the biggest cut that was ever made on the Rio."

Ten minutes later the border faro-dealer, realtor and gunman held parley with the financial backer of the strange expedition. He explained he could have met the drive earlier ex-

cept for the unlooked-for killings in Chamizal.

"I had to shoot a simpleton, for the moral effect," he informed blandly. "Being a half-wit gun-toter, he gives me a perfect out. Same thing with that hombre Joe Franco that I drilled—he was leading a mob to lynch me, and that gives me perfect out No. 2. I had to take a chance on missing Juan Escajeda's fingers—to show him who was the real draw artist in this little burg, and I made an enemy in him that you'll have to bribe to be good. He likes his liquor, and that'll be easy. But Bravo Jim Calhoun is the hombre that looks like trouble for us Tehannos in Chamizal."

He broke the news now for the first time about the threat of the Pole Corral man to call off the deal for the sale of his rancho. Dan Spellman swore lustily at the revelation.

"But there is no cause for weeps," affirmed Karg, grimly. "He'll come through. I've told him what would happen if he didn't. I intend to get him anyway, after the way he acted in that mob affair, but he don't know it. He'll come through, Dan—today."

The gunman's confidence made the cattleman-capitalist feel better. Then Karg revealed his own personal plans.

"Soon as you bring your bunch into Chami-

zal, I'll surrender for trial, and give bond," he asserted. "Bond won't be refused, with big Dan Spellman behind me. And there won't be any more lynching talk when those natives see my Texas friends come in with their guns in their holsters."

"It won't be necessary to handle the authorities by any show of force, in that way," averred the border baron. He drew from an inside pocket a shiny bit of metal, turned it in his fingers for Karg's inspection.

"A badge!" whispered the gunman. "You mean——"

"I expect to use it, if needed," said Dan Spellman, his florid face complacent. "This will bring the sheriff to time, and even that deputy constable draw artist you crossed in that gun-play."

"How'd you get it?" Karg asked, marveling.

"I've got friends, right up at the throne. So you're sitting pretty, Anton, when the time comes. Meanwhile, I reckon it would be a little better, since you showed your gun hand, if you and I didn't appear to be too exceptionally friendly. A little later on it'll be different. You understand?"

Karg agreed that Spellman was right.

Down in the valley, astride his buckskin, Bravo Jim Calhoun sat in his saddle watching the new arrivals to Chamizal range. And he marveled much at what he saw about the size of the Texas contingent, and the scant herd they drove.

He was beginning to understand vaguely that the Pole Corral was the key to unusual operations, the nature of which he was not yet able to guess. Yet he was not the type of man to lose any sleep over the mystery.

CHAPTER VII

Fiesta Day

ON THE following day the little Texas herd found sweet water, woolly grama and tobosa grass at the edge of the valley, safe in the fenced lower pasture. Chuck and hoodlum wagons rolled onward before the adobe bunk house of the old Chaves rancho, now to be known as the Double Diamond. The Mexican cook, to save time, prepared the Monday meal at the wagon. At this stage Anton Karg's sharp eyes were first to detect a suspicious dust cloud far down the valley, in the direction of Chamizal.

"I've been expecting that," he said to Spellman. "If it's Sheriff Lucero, feel him out. I don't aim to surrender until the time's ripe, when I'm sure I won't fall into another trap."

He took the saddle again. "Tell him I was here—he likely has a description of this borrowed horse anyway and maybe one of his party knows the brute's tracks. I aim to get rid of the animal pronto. Tell him I rode east

and intend to surrender if he guarantees bond." The gunman set off up the draw.

It was the sheriff, with three men. Spellman was cordial in his greeting, for a purpose. He admitted Karg had been here, but set the time an hour earlier. He even confessed that the realty man had acted for him in a land deal. But Spellman was astonished, he said, to learn that Karg had got into trouble and had turned out to be a killer.

"I didn't know much about him, but he was highly recommended by the bank down in Pecos. Seemed a likely fellow. Come to think of it, he did say the sheriff was looking for him, but he was going in to give himself up if he could be sure of being admitted to bond."

"There won't be any bond," declared the sheriff, grimly, and Constable Juan Escajeda, who was with the party, affirmed the judgment with a vociferous oath.

Dan Spellman smiled. He did not show the badge at this stage. "I'm plumb sorry I didn't know about it, or my boys would have held him, Sheriff," he declared, with friendliness. "Being a new citizen of your county, I aim to cooperate with the folks in authority every step of the way. I'm mighty proud to know you,

Sheriff. How come you haven't got more men on the hunt?"

Lucero made an impatient gesture toward Chamizal. "The white-livered bunch there was scared stiff of him. I'd made 'em join me, but it ain't any job for any hombre without he's got sand. I'm mighty obliged to you, Mr. Spellman, and proud to make your acquaintance."

The posse made off, and from the manner in which Juan Escajeda followed the tracks of the right horse Dan Spellman knew the deputy constable was familiar with the animal.

The officers had no more than got out of sight behind the mesa line a mile away when Karg appeared out of the draw, on foot. "I jumped off that brute a short time after I left here, and hid in a mesquite clump. Figured the animal would hit it up for town—but he didn't. They'll find him riderless."

He helped himself to a new mount. "I'll take a pasear over to Pole Corral range and stay in The Cave over tonight, till you get things ironed out. Yes," he answered Spellman's question, "I located La Cueva by the map you sent, and that cavern is all it's cracked up to be—reason I advised the offer of seventy-five thousand." He helped himself to a lim-

ited supply of canned goods and jerky from the cook's wagon, and rode north, following the trough of a deep arroyo leading to the Pole Corral.

In the afternoon, Dan Spellman and Big Olquin left their Texas cowpunchers in charge of the Double Diamond outfit and started for Bravo Jim's home base. It was the boss' object to see the young cowman at the earliest possible moment about the deal for the neighboring rancho.

"Karg must 'a' raised Hades the last day or two around here," suggested the half-breed foreman. "I hope he ain't queered yore game."

"My game can't be queered," informed Spellman, modestly. "If this Bravo Jim balks, it only means he leaves the country—or the worse for him. Hello, looks like this Calhoun was busy with his spring roundup—kind of late and bad for screw-worm for calf branding." He motioned toward the bunched cattle north of the rancho just leased.

"I know the lay now," asserted Olquin. "Same as it was when I was here six years ago, I reckon. That's Bravo's front yard—hayfield—down towards the Rio." He pointed out the green alfalfa area under fence far below a cluster of brown adobes. "By Jerry, the

Pole Corral hasn't finished brandin' yet, and there's only a couple men with the cattle. I reckon that bunch of folks over thataway explains the answer."

His lean leathery finger indicated a murky white haze and a throng of people near the village.

Dan Spellman nodded slowly. "Bravo Jim won't be with his herd; even most of his men are in town. What kind of a celebration is that?" he wanted to know.

"Let's see." Big Olquin scratched his oily black head. "Some kind uh fiesta. These natives is always layin' off work to 'tend to some sech church day. 'Tain't Poseyemo time, when these hombres burn fires to light Miz Lady Guadalupe down the trail; 'tain't the Feast of Saint Genervieve, when they set candles on their housetops. May sixteenth—yea, that's it—May fifteen, sixteen and seventeen there's a three-day fiesta for San Ysidro, the hombre that's 'sposed to have brung good spring crops. This is the day uh the games, likely. Bravo Jim will be down there watchin' the fun."

Dan Spellman turned his mount toward the village, his half-breed foreman riding beside him. Reaching the drowsy, sunbaked hamlet, they found it deserted; they cut across the

plaza and up toward the open field where the games were in progress.

Here the scene was one of color, gaiety, noise and action. Chamizal may have been timid, even fearful, the night before; but to judge from the hilarity of the youth of the village and their parents, the fugitive killer Karg was not an item in their existence now. Even the fact that Joe Franco, one of their number, had fallen a victim of the gunman did not deter the general rejoicing over the beneficence of the good Saint Ysidro.

An Indian horse race was on, in which the descendants of the primitive dwellers in the valley rode their ponies bareback, their glistening black hair streaming, their thin cotton shirts billowing out behind them in the wind. Hatless, shoeless, they stuck to their mounts and drove them for the half mile down the sandy stretch. Dan Spellman and his companion were not interested in the outcome, nor in the cock-fights and the Mexican chicken-pull race that followed, yet they both halted in their search for Bravo Jim long enough to watch the contenders, mixed-Spanish and Indian alike, lean from their horses and try to jerk the buried rooster, its head exposed, from the hole in the ground. There were numerous

vaqueros and some American cowboys present, but the Pole Corral owner whom they sought was not in evidence.

"I reckon this Bravo Jim might be scared Karg would ride in town again," grinned Big Olquin.

"I don't think so, from what Anton said," remarked Spellman. "Now what's broke loose?"

He motioned toward the stage stop, back toward the plaza. A crowd was gathering from the lower end of the fiesta grounds, rapidly forming a circle around two men engaged in a fist-fight.

The Double Diamond pair hurried down with the rest. By this time the combat had developed into a full-fledged no-limit go. Blows were being exchanged with vigor on the part of both. Dan Spellman knew neither of the contestants, though he saw one was a pale, tenderfoot-appearing white man, the other a hairy, dark-skinned native, who had been one of the Sheriff's posse.

"What's the fuss?" the cattleman asked the man nearest him, a cowpuncher.

"That air lunger jest got off the stage," chuckled the cowboy, "and he turns around and asks Juan Escajeda—that's the big-headed

deputy—to carry his bags to the hotel, figurin' he was a cargador. Juan, havin' a couple drinks, slams back some kind of a insult in Spanish, and this tenderfoot hombre seems to understand the Spanish, because he lights into Juan pronto, and——” He let out a shriek of joy as the stranger, long-legged and very thin and frail-looking, got in a telling blow upon the officer's jaw.

“He's a boxer, that dude is!” exclaimed the puncher. “Go lick him, mister lunger-man!” he sang out, cheerily.

Hoots and bawls from the native contingent. Juan Escajeda came back with a shower of short-arm jabs. The dusky element in the crowd yelled approval. As the swart contender pressed his antagonist back toward the edge of the plaza the natives jabbered and howled encouragement.

“*Bravo! Bravo! Hit him!*” a chorus arose. But it died as suddenly in a thunderous “*Carajo!*” as, with a neat duck aside, the tenderfoot let drive and hooked the petty political boss on the point of his chin. Juan's head jerked back, his feet left the ground, and he collapsed on his back.

The wrath of the native backers of the constable turned upon the tenderfoot. “*Vaya!*

Get out of town!" they yelled. "Put him back on the stage! We don't want any more lungers in Chamizal, anyway! Hustle him off, hombres!" There was a rush for the stranger, and he was lifted and shoved onto the steps of the bus. "Out of town he goes!"

At that juncture Spellman and Olquin saw a horseman step his mount up to the stage. The newcomer was garbed as a range rider. At his appearance alone the crowd suddenly fell back.

The pleasant-faced horseman spoke in low tones for some minutes to the stranger who had whipped the swarthy constable. He turned to the crowd.

"This man is all right, amigos," he said smilingly. "I'm taking charge of him."

Someone yelled another "*Bravo!*" Reluctantly others fell away from the stage. The rider raised one of the tenderfoot's bags to his saddle, and made a pathway through the crowd for the pale-faced man, who walked beside him carrying a smaller bag.

"Who is that hombre?" Dan Spellman asked the cowboy who had spoken before.

"Bravo Jim Calhoun," was the reply.

As the young cowman turned aside with the health-seeker there was a chorus of more

"*Bravos!*" Juan Escajeda stirred in the dust, sat up and looked about him in dazed fashion. He was helped to his feet, and the crowd broke away for the fiesta-day games.

Dan Spellman exchanged a look with Big Olquin, and the two walked over to the Pole Corral owner, now standing with the tender-foot.

"I'd like to see you a minute, Mr. Calhoun," said the Double Diamond man, extending a hand and introducing himself. "Where can we have a little talk?"

"Right here," said Bravo Jim pleasantly, looking into the other's domineering countenance.

"In private, Mr. Calhoun."

Bravo Jim walked a few yards aside with the man from Texas. "If it's about the sale of the Pole Corral, I reckon we can talk here," announced the ranch owner.

"That's the way I like to do business!" declared Spellman, brusquely. "I'm ready to go through with the deal on the basis arranged." Dan Spellman produced the cashier's check. "Seventy-five thousand." He extended the paper. "I'm ready to take your deed, Mr. Calhoun, just as soon as we can locate your lawyer."

Bravo Jim made no move to take the check. "The Pole Corral is not for sale, Mr. Spellman," he said, politely. "I've already informed your Mr. Karg to that effect."

"What!" exclaimed the Texan, in mock surprise. "You don't mean to tell me you won't go through?"

"I've told you. Being mighty busy, Mr. Spellman, I'll beg to be excused." The cowboy moved toward the hitch-rack. The florid Texan strode after him.

"Your reason, Calhoun?"

"There's several. Chief one, right now, is that this Karg party informed me he'd go gunning my way if I didn't sign. That reason alone is a perfectly good one." Bravo Jim walked over beside the tenderfoot.

"Can you ride a horse, Renshaw?" Bravo asked the health-seeker.

"Having played polo, yes," acknowledged the slim young man. The ranch boss motioned to Ira Estes. "Get yourself another horse, Ira; I'm taking the pinto for our friend." He turned the stirrup of the big stock saddle, and Renshaw mounted with ease. As Bravo Jim rose in the saddle on his buckskin Dan Spellman stepped forth truculently.

"This deal isn't over, by any means, Cal-

houn," he said, and his tone held a threat.

"No." The young cowman seemed surprised.

"Not any. Not by half."

"Who said so?"

"I said so. Dan Spellman. Folks that know Dan Spellman don't usually try to prod him into a scrap, Calhoun."

"That so?" Another surprised look.

"Yes, sir."

"Well, time's pressing, Spellman. Tell your hombres, including Karg, to start the music any time you figure it's right and proper." Showing smiling teeth, Bravo Jim loped away with the tenderfoot Renshaw, most recent arrival on Chamizal range.

CHAPTER VIII

"Bravo's a Single Man"

"**T**HAT hombre's hard," murmured Big Olquin, staring after the departing Pole Corral owner. "Looks like he cain't be coaxed or led. He'll have to be rode."

"It looks that way," admitted the Double Diamond boss, meditatively. "We might as well go back to the boys. I'll see first if that new buggy of mine has arrived."

He led the way to the livery stable and garage, introduced himself, and inquired of Tom Jeffry whether there was a new car awaiting him there.

"You bet yuh, Mr. Spellman. Right over here and all fueled up waiting to go. Arrived two days since, and she's a beauty." Jeffry pointed out the glistening blue straight-eight roadster, bought and paid for to the order of Anton Karg and driven up from the sales-rooms in El Paso.

"Just keep it here, Mr. Jeffry. I'll be back for it in the morning, likely. Can't somehow

get used to motors, when there's good horse-flesh aplenty. I'm riding today."

Dan Spellman crossed the street toward the pole rack, where the pair had left their horses.

Half way there he halted. A big automobile was rounding the plaza. The car was a valley passenger machine, containing the label "El Paso" under the license and driven by a youth wearing a stage chauffeur's cap. In it was a single passenger, a young woman in the driver's seat. Her eyes were searching for someone. She spoke to the pilot, and the car halted alongside the plaza.

It was not every day that a pretty girl arrived in Chamizal. It had been many days since Dan Spellman had seen anyone like her.

Instead of proceeding toward the hitch-rack, the Double Diamond boss had reconsidered, and with his companion strolled idly across from the plaza, noting meanwhile that the passenger seemed confused and anxious about her next move. She stepped from the car. Suddenly the cattleman left Olquin and walked toward her.

He raised his big sombrero. "Was you looking for someone, lady?" he inquired, politely. "Pardon me for asking, but you seemed like you might be."

The girl was stunning, his practiced eye revealed. She was different, too, in dress, in her air, even in complexion, from the beauties of the arid Southwest. Her color was not the tanned, uniform hue of the girls of the sunshine belt. This one's skin was a velvety cream, with a delicate glow in the cheeks. Her hair was a wonderful chestnut gold. Her eyes were very clear, alert and limpid blue.

Dan Spellman prided himself upon his quick eye with livestock and women. Without seeming to do so, he had appraised every feature of her; first, her carriage, flawless; the slim yet shapely turn of ankles; the bewitching face, dainty nose, straight brows, firm, round chin; soft rare-hued hair, under a little velvety brown toque with a touch of bright orange that emphasized her vivid coloring.

"Thank you." She looked past him. "Perhaps you can tell me whether a young man, very tall and pale, left the stage here a short time ago?"

"Yes, ma'am, he did," replied the cattleman promptly. "If he's your husband, you'll find him on the way to the Pole Corral rancho right this minute."

The girl breathed a quick sigh of relief.

"No, he isn't my husband," she said, smil-

ing faintly. "Where is this rancho, please?"

"Up thataway." Dan Spellman raised his arm northwestward. "This friend of yours somehow picked up with a hombre named Calhoun soon as he got off the stage, this Calhoun being the present owner of the Pole Corral, and the two rode off together. I reckon he's going to board him a spell, or something. That young feller's a health-seeker, I reckon, ma'am?"

"Why—yes," she said, dubiously. "You might call him that. I'm very much obliged." She turned toward the car driver, drew a bill from her purse and paid him. The automobile turned and bowled away down the valley.

She stooped to take up her grip, but Dan Spellman seized it. "This is a strange country to me. Where is the hotel?" she asked.

"There is no hotel, ma'am. Was you figuring to——?"

"No hotel!" Blank consternation came into the young woman's face. "Then I shan't be able to stay here!"

"Mayhap you'd like to ride out and see your—your friend," suggested the man. "I'll be glad to drive you out in my car."

"Oh no!" Bewilderment was registered upon the comely face. "I wouldn't want to go

there. I shall have to take the next stage out." She walked uneasily back and forth, then suddenly reconsidered. "No, I cannot do that! I came here to be near him, without his knowing. Isn't there a ranch or some such place nearby that takes tourist boarders?"

The slate eyes of Dan Spellman contracted slowly. "Yes, ma'am, there is. Folks out here are democratic-like; of course you won't find things like a hotel on a cattle ranch. But if the place would suit, I'd be proud to have you go to the Double Diamond. My name is Dan Spellman, ma'am." He said it as though she ought to have heard of such a notable in the Southwest.

"But I don't know. Are there other boarders?"

"Not right now, ma'am—it's a bit out of season. Old Man Chaves—it's his place I've taken over recently—made a business of dude ranching in winter time. But you're welcome, ma'am."

The young woman looked about her confusedly. "I thought I would take a ranch after I had got located in a hotel—if Rufus stopped hereabouts," she said finally. Determination came to the blue eyes. "I might accept your kind offer, Mr. Spellman. There are

other women about your ranch, of course?"

"Yes, ma'am. The cook and housekeeper. We don't lay any claim to anything fancy, of course. But things are comfortable. How long would you calculate on staying?"

"Oh, that depends. This Calhoun you speak of—how did Rufus happen to get acquainted with him?"

"Why, seems like your Rufus got mixed up with a Mexican when he got off the stage, and this Calhoun happened along. I didn't hear if your friend hired out to board with Bravo Jim or what. But if you're figuring on being near him without him knowing it, like you said, why I reckon the Double Diamond would be just about your place."

He waxed confidential. "I'm recent here myself, Miss. But I'm mighty well known all over the Southwest—mines, cattle, lands and lumber. Going into cattle here on the Rio is a little sideline with me. Folks down in this country count me a wealthy man, I don't mind saying."

"Indeed!" There was a hint of something hidden in her tone, and Dan Spellman wondered. This girl had the air of one to whom money was commonplace.

"Yes, ma'am. But out in this country a

man might be rated a capitalist one minute and a plain range rider the next. What I mean, we rub elbows here with them that don't own a cent. A man's a man in the West—rated for what he is underneath. You'll see a dusty-looking hombre walking down the street or riding a bronc, for instance, and you won't know to look at him if he's worth a nester's mite or a million. That's the West."

The girl's eyes scrutinized the magnate's apparel—alkali-encrusted boots and spurs, scuffed leather chaps, wrinkled flannel shirt, big range sombrero. She seemed to marvel.

"Yes, ma'am. What a man owns don't show on the surface. I'm merely mentioning this to show that tourist folks mustn't expect too much in the way of city conveniences and style on a Western cattle ranch. But our hearts are big as that mountain, Miss, and what we've got you're welcome to, if you can put up with a little lack of polish while you're at the rancho."

"I shan't expect too much," she said, smiling faintly. "It will be worth a great deal to me to be able to stay near my—this friend—if you will be kind enough not to let it be known to him that I am here."

"You can trust me in that, Miss, till the cows come home," declared Dan Spellman,

blithely. "But how in mischief can I keep from holding it secret, ma'am, when I haven't heard your name!" His laugh was jovial, genuine, as the girl might have expected from a land baron of the free and open West.

"I am Miss Fay," the young woman said, promptly. "That is not my full name, however. But you may call me that, because if Rufus hears such a person is staying at your ranch he will not know it is I."

"I sabe." Dan Spellman's eyes gleamed an instant, but their expression changed swiftly to guileless matter-of-factness as he suggested: "Now I reckon we might drive right out, if you're ready."

The young woman hesitated a moment. Her decision was not long delayed. "Very well," she agreed. The cattleman, carrying her bag, led the way to the livery and garage.

In a few minutes he had driven out his shiny new straight-eight roadster, and parked it along the board sidewalk for the girl to enter. "Just make yourself comfortable a couple minutes, Miss Fay," he invited, "and I'll be with you." He stepped down and walked toward the plaza for a word with Big Olquin, who had remained in the background during the machinations of his boss.

Dan Spellman produced a roll of bills, handed them to his foreman. "Shake a leg, now, Olie. Hire a Mexican woman cook, pronto—first female you can lay hand to. Then hunt up a white woman—anybody that can use the money—for housekeeper——"

"Housekeeper!" Olquin stared.

"Time's too short to explain, Olie. Pay anything necessary, but get the women. Bring the señora here if you can—that lady might be scarey about riding out with me alone. But anyway, get 'em both. Grab another car—I've fixed it with the garage man. Put up the horses. Beat it to the Double Diamond, pronto. *I aim to arrive after you.*"

"But——"

"Get 'em! And tell 'em to keep their tongues hackamored about how long they've been at the Diamond." He explained more fully, then hustled off and got behind the wheel of his new roadster.

But he was not ready to start just yet. He found another excuse for delay, and left the car. When he came back, his fair passenger seemed uneasy. She uttered her thoughts:

"I suppose it will be all right, but in the East it wouldn't be thought proper. You are really a stranger."

Dan Spellman gazed at her in mock astonishment. "Why, I never thought of that. Look at this." He showed a fat bank book. "Out here things are different. Happens our cook is in town, and might be I can find her to ride out along."

"Oh, I don't mind. I expected to have to do some unconventional things—before this business is over with."

"There's the cook now!" exclaimed the Double Diamond boss, gesturing down the street. A Mexican woman wearing a black reboza over her head and shoulders was walking with Big Olquin. Dan Spellman stepped out of the car and waved his hand. Olquin was already directing the new employe toward the roadster. Spellman hurried up to the pair, got the señora's name. "Now get the housekeeper," he directed Olquin.

"This is Carmelita," he introduced the servant to the girl in the car, and the pair got in. The Double Diamond boss, delighted to know the native woman spoke no English, took the wheel and started around the plaza and out the dusty road.

He killed time, dilating upon the wonders of the Rio Grande valley and pointing out objects of interest to the Eastern girl. A few

miles out he left the road, taking the open range toward the north, where the ground was firm and the going was not bad. Now and then he looked back for Olquin and his other employe, meanwhile keeping the young woman genuinely interested in the odd customs of the native people, their burro water-trains, pottery alfareria, ollas, jacales and adobes, their quaint dress, feast days, the wonders of range and desert and mountains, stories of pueblo ruins, cliff dwellings, rattlers, centipedes, tarantulas, scorpions, prairie dogs, lobo wolves, mountain lions and the lowly coyote.

It was drawing near to evening when Olquin's car moved rapidly up the road, many miles from the point where the Double Diamond boss had driven to show his passenger the "lay of the land" about the rancho. By the time Miss Fay expressed a desire to go to the ranch house, the cattleman was ready, and he made his way there overland.

Mary Jenson, a gaunt Swedish woman, was tearing about the old adobe casa trying to make things appear in order. Dan Spellman was more than satisfied at the luck that was with him when he leased the old Chaves place, a comfortable, commodious adobe already furnished in the manner of the casas of a passing

generation. He had agreed, it was true, that the casa should not be used; that his men would leave things as they found them there, occupying only the men's quarters until the year's lease expired. But circumstances had made it necessary for him to use the house, and he would compensate Bernardo Chaves later for the accommodation.

The girl from New York—her host had learned that was her home—was delighted with the quaint old casa, enthralled with its native antiques. If she found things rather dusty in view of a housekeeper being attached to the place, she did not betray the fact. Mrs. Jenson and Carmelita marveled at the way she raved about old pewter tankards, service-worn, tarnished Spanish silver, joiner-made chests and bureaus, chairs, tables and drapes of odd design. Mrs. Jenson showed the guest the spacious corner bedchamber as her own, and Dan Spellman slipped an extra ten-dollar bill into her hand because she had followed Big Olquin's instructions to the letter.

"I was afraid she wouldn't be dumb enough," grinned the Double Diamond boss a short time later.

"She ain't dumb," asserted Olquin. "I told her the lady was yore niece, fresh from the

East, and how you was bringin' her here for a surprise visit."

"Good enough. Now you ride out and inform the boys to the same effect. I'll advise the lady she's supposed to be my niece while she's here, on account of these punchers being hell-bent for joshing and hazing of tourists—so they'll respect her more. At the same time it'll protect Miss Fay against any ugly rumors."

"Uh huh." Olquin's shifty blue eyes held a strange light in them. "I sabe."

Dan Spellman did not like the breed's tone. "Look here, Olie," he said, gravely. "I aim to be on the level with this young lady. Understand? I've taken a powerful liking to her—do you know what I mean?"

"Mayhap I do, Mr. Spellman." Olquin did not know how to take his boss.

"I mean I haven't ever seen a woman since my wife died that I'd consider sharing my money—marrying—till I saw this girl today."

Olquin nodded, marveling, and started away. "Tell Felipe to bring over what the new cook needs for supper," directed Spellman. "He'll still have his job in the outside cook-house, rassling chuck for the boys as

usual. Carmelita will cook for you and me and the lady—and maybe, if Karg comes in from The Cave, for him too."

Dan Spellman was not altogether certain how Miss Fay would take his suggestion that she be considered his niece. The argument that she would thus be shielded from the pranks of the cowboys usually visited upon "dude tourists" was, he knew, a lame one. But when he saw her a short time later and broached the subject, he found her not only willing but eager.

"I've been wondering how I would manage it. Later I may get mail, or a telegram, under my last name. Rufus must not suspect me even if he learns of it. But if I am thought your niece——" Her lips tightened with determination. "That will fit in with my plans exactly!"

And so it was arranged. Dan Spellman strolled out to the old patio and walked up and down the cracked flagstone walk for some minutes. "Things are breaking my way," he mused. "I always was lucky. There hasn't been a big deal I tried to put through that some high card didn't fall to me just when I needed it most."

He gazed back through the open door to-

ward the girl of the wonderful hair. "Bravo's a single man," he reflected slowly. "I don't reckon he could refuse this charmer anything—no man could. She'll prove an interesting dude boarder, in more ways than one."

CHAPTER IX

A Derelict From the City

ANOTHER problem of a "dude boarder" was on that same Wednesday evening being solved by Bravo Jim Calhoun at the Pole Corral, but in a very different way.

"You can ride, Rufus," said the ranch owner, familiarly. "I'm going to take you at your word. You're hired, on the roundup, to look, listen and learn. Baldy will break you in in easy stages. If things get too rough, come to me. Ira, take Rufe over to camp, and give Baldy this." He handed forth a brief note. This is what it said:

Baldy: This is J. Rufus Renshaw, a green hand. Use him. He's not exactly a lunger, so you needn't coddle him. He asks no favors. Show him none. Jim.

J. Rufus Renshaw, of New York, had insisted upon the wording of that note exactly as it stood. And Bravo Jim, not without a sense of humor, had penciled the epistle with a certain fiendish delight. There was something about this Renshaw's appearance on the

Pole Corral that he did not understand, and he marked the tenderfoot down as a possible emissary of forces seeking his ranch. He intended to find out in short order how much of a tenderfoot Renshaw actually was.

J. Rufus, as the newcomer had insisted upon having his name written, had seized with alacrity upon a change of clothes befitting a cowpuncher, and without asking a chance to rest up after a long journey, set off with Ira Estes to spend his first night in a cow camp.

Ira returned an hour later. "That pore lunger is shore due for a hazin'," he declared, gravely. "Baldy he passed that note around to the boys, and they come up one by one and reached up their paws and finger-shook his hand like they do in sassiety. Yuh oughtn't 'a' done that, Bravo. They'll make his life plain hell. What'n sin yuh hire him for, anyway?"

Bravo Jim grinned. "He's no more of a lunger, Ira, than I am. Whisky's what's ailing that hombre—bad liquor. He admitted he wasn't troubled with lungs a little bit. Wait and see."

The cowman did not confide in his employe that he had hired Renshaw solely because he suspected him. That Wednesday morning,

after the threat of the gunman Karg, Bravo Jim had received a significant letter from his El Paso bank:

We beg to advise that we have made out in your name a cashier's check for \$75,000. As you are an old customer of this bank, we wish to state that this money was paid over to us for this purpose, but we do not know its source. We thought you had better be informed of this, because, while the money is good, we have reason to believe it came to us through certain forces operating at variance with the law. Kindly consider this communication confidential.

Having this in mind, as well as the experience with the deceptive "real estate man," Karg, Bravo Jim's suspicions were aroused when, after the fight with Juan Escajeda, J. Rufus Renshaw had asked for a certain Jim Calhoun and declared he wanted to hire out as a common cowpuncher.

The threatening attitude of the fiesta crowd had helped to influence the Pole Corral cowman, it is true, but his curiosity had been stimulated by the unusual job-seeker at this time. Then on the way to the ranch the stranger had inquired casually about ranch values:

"What would you consider a fair price for a ranch establishment on the Rio Grande—

one, for instance, like your own?" the tender-foot had asked.

"Mine doesn't happen to be for sale," the cowman had returned, bluntly.

Added to all of this, Bravo Jim had smelled liquor on the supposed health-seeker before they started for the Pole Corral together. The cowman had asked him where he got it.

For answer, J. Rufus had produced a flask from his hip. "I've taken my last drink, Mr. Calhoun," he had said, and hurled the bottle against a rocky ledge along the trail, shattering it.

Thursday morning when Bravo Jim was preparing to lend a hand with the final day's branding at the calf roundup, Baldy Carr rode over to see him. "Where'n mischief you pick up that new hand, Bravo?" he wanted to know.

"How's he making it, Baldy?"

The foreman's shaggy brows uplifted and his eyes twinkled. "He's green enough," he chuckled. "Don't know a rope from a latigo, scarcely. But, Lordy, he can ride! He's a heller, too—and he can box! And rattle! Lordy, believe me a liar, but he throwed Big Bill Brand plumb over his haid!"

"Tell another, Baldy," grinned the boss.

"It's the Gawd's truth, Bravo. Ira and I

have figured it out. He's a kind of mental wreck or something, but an athlete, one of them polo players and football stars just out of college—knows how to box, and he's a jew-jitsu artist. That's how he throwed Bill Brand."

Baldy Carr's wrinkled features registered merriment. "The boys rode him aplenty when he come, everybody shouting 'Hey, J. Rufus, you do this, and you do that.' 'Come yere, J. Rufus, and tail-hold this dogie.' They was rassling a little sleepered red calf, and let in Old Sally on him, them jumping over the fence when she come a-tearing. J. Rufus, he was plump flabbergasted, and I reckon he was scared stiff, because he stood like a statue, not moving a muscle. Danged if that mother cow didn't come up, eyes wide open, and stops in front of him, snorts and backs away. Again she charges, and stops against his laigs, without making a hostile pass."

"You know a cow will do that, if you stand stone still," laughed Bravo.

"Course they will—I've won a bet on standing before a snaky female critter thataway. But that hombre didn't know anything about that. He just played to hawg luck, every time the boys tried to pull anything. Result was they got kinda nasty, and Mose Given he

squared off to make believe he was going to give the new hand a licking. J. Rufus sails in and cleans him, and invites more to come on. Then's when Bill Brand mosies over to entertain the camp with a little exhibition of ketch-as-ketch-can. And then's when Bill went high-tailing over that tenderfoot's haid!" Baldy laughed heartily and long.

"This morning, early, the boys gets a saddle on that ornery buckner Kyropractor and coaxes J. Rufus aboard. Everybody was all primed to get sweet revenge at last. But danged if J. Rufus didn't stick to that cuss till he quits pitching and trots along gentle as a lamb. He'll make a right tolerable hand, Bravo Jim."

With Baldy, the ranch owner returned to the calf roundup, and spent a busy day finishing up with the marking. He was more than pleased with the way J. Rufus Renshaw insisted upon doing his share of the work, jumping in with the boys at the sweaty task of "rasling" the calves at the branding, altering and ear-marking. In the evening he had a talk with J. Rufus, and felt him out.

"Were you figuring on buying a ranch?" he wanted to know.

"I can't say I was, exactly—unless I decide to locate hereabouts permanently."

His answer rang true and other declarations about his desire to find a home in the West seemed sincere. Bravo began to like the man. He asked a pointed question:

"I'm wondering, Rufus, if Dan Spellman might have sent you here?"

The Easterner insisted he had never heard of Dan Spellman, and he told a straight forward story that moved the cowman more than he was willing to admit. "I'm grateful to you, Bravo Jim, for this job," J. Rufus said. "There is something unusual about my being here, I'll admit. I'm going to need the help of a man like you."

The tenderfoot, tired to exhaustion by the gruelling day's work to which he had not been accustomed, leaned back against a saddle banked up against the bed wagon. "I'm not the usual health-seeker—lungs are sound enough. I've got a weakness—liquor.

"Got mixed up with a wild bunch back East—it started in college," he went on. "I couldn't go the pace like some others—it got me, made a slave of me. I was a hero on the football field and track, yet I went the pace until I lost my degree and was kicked out of school in disgrace, which I deserved. It went from bad to worse."

The man's soft dark eyes shot with pain. "I disgraced those near and dear to me. My family is one of the oldest and most respected on Long Island. The disgrace only made me reckless—I got into worse company. The poison stuff nearly cost me my eyes. The papers found it out and made a noise about it. Then the young woman I was to have married gave me back my ring.

"I deserved it. No man ever claimed a lovelier girl, or one more brilliant or of better social standing. The experience maddened me, and I fell again and again; and because I was J. Rufus Renshaw the reporters camped on my trail.

"It was one reckless debauch after another, in Boston, Newport, New York, Florida—night clubs, cabarets, the beaches, yachting parties, the boulevards. I went to jail for running down a child in a wild ride on Fifth Avenue last Christmas eve. That sobered me, and I resolved I'd never touch a drop of the stuff again."

His long, newly-blistered hand trembled as he gestured futilely. "When I got out, my family disowned me—brothers, father, sisters—all but my mother—God bless her. But the same bunch were waiting for me—the poison

stuff was everywhere I went. I fought for weeks against it, but—I fell again. The scandal of that last escapade about broke my mother's heart, I guess. When I sobered and realized what had happened, I jumped into the bay. They dragged me out, and the newspapers had another sensational story to tell about the scion of the Renshaws. That was the end for me. I left a suicide note that I was going into the bay for good, and jumped onto the next train west, thinking to blot out my name from my mother's tortured thoughts.

"But I was resolved to begin life anew, regain my health, and make a man of myself. Some day, I intend to go back and redeem myself in the eyes of my family. Out here doing gruelling outdoor work that will occupy mind and body I know I can leave the stuff alone. This work in the hot glaring sun is already burning the craving out of my blood. I need this job, Bravo Jim, more than you can understand. To me this is Heaven."

The cowman said he understood. He resolved that the tenderfoot should receive his personal help in every way possible. Already J. Rufus Renshaw was fighting his way back. In a single day he had won the respect of every rough-neck cowpuncher on the Pole Corral.

When Bravo Jim returned to the ranch house at dark, Ira Estes, who had again been on a supply purchasing trip to town that afternoon, was excited over more news. "That real-estater come in and give himself up, and danged if Judge Ingalls didn't let him out on a measly thousand-dollar bond!" he fairly shouted from the bunk house.

"I didn't expect the judge would do that," affirmed Bravo Jim, "even on the showing that Karg could make on self-defense. Especially when Deputy Juan Escajeda would use his influence against a bond."

"Yeah, Juan did, all right," asserted Ira, bitterly. "He'd halted the move of that killer to run at large, too, if it wasn't for them Tehanners. I was grabbed for a witness—that Half-Wit Charlie case—and while the hearin' is on and while Juan's friends are makin' a show of force in the judge's office and outside, who rides into town but about ten of the rawest hombres that ever hit the Rio, wearing their artil'ry in plain view. Them Double Diamond punchers of Dan Spellman, I mean."

Ira's pudgy face clouded. "They didn't do a thing but ride slow-like up and down the street, and they was orderly as a padre's baile. But they was servin' notice all the time that

Chamizal wasn't any longer a natives' town. In the midst of things, who rides up to the office of the justice of the peace but Dan Spellman, and he goes in an' talks to the jedge. From where I was standin' I swear I seen somethin' that looked like a badge he showed the jedge, but I wouldn't swear it. Anyway, it wasn't five minutes till Jedge Ingalls fixes bond at a thousand, and out walks that assassin Karg like he owns the town. I tell yuh, Bravo, it's an outrage, especially with that hombre threatenin' to get you next!"

The ranchman smiled at Ira's earnestness. There was no minimizing the fact that Karg was a menace at large, of course. The thousand-dollar bond would mean little to the forces behind the gunman's realty scheme. The badge incident, if true, interested Bravo keenly.

That night, a few minutes after 11 o'clock, the cowman's mother awakened him. Her gentle face held a strange fear. "I thought I heard shooting—back in the foothills," she whispered. "Oh, there it is again!" Her voice quailed at the sound. Bravo Jim tensed, half way out of bed. Distant drumming gunfire, like the rattle of musketry, came to his ears from far up on the old ore road.

Never in his memory had Bravo Jim heard such a sound on Chamizal range. For long minutes it continued, in spurts and then again steadily. Only a score of men armed with repeating rifles could have duplicated the firing, and then they could not have equaled it in steadiness and evenly-spaced weirdness.

"Oh, Jim, what is the meaning of this?" sobbed the mother. "Baldy says there are ugly rumors about these men coming in on the Chaves place. Surely they could not be doing that shooting now!"

Bravo Jim wanted to find out. He dressed hurriedly, rode with his men as far as Pyramid Peak. For hours the range was scoured, but there was no explanation of the firing.

At daylight Baldy Carr was worried over a new development. "Joe Hillis hasn't been in camp since yesterday. You know he's not a drinker, and I don't reckon this new outfit could offer him enough money to leave us, especially without notice. Joe's dropped from sight, and I'll wager this Texas bunch has a hand in it."

Bravo Jim's eyes flickered. He did not fancy sitting idly by and waiting for Joe to turn up. After breakfast he decided he had urgent business in town. With Karg again on the streets

of Chamizal, following the show of force by the Double Diamond punchers, it was certain the gunman would consider his position secure and he would show his hand to the full if Bravo appeared, in the light of the most recent developments.

It was shortly after 9 o'clock that Friday morning when the ranchman rode leisurely up the street past the little real estate office labeled: "Valley Lands—Grazing Lands. Anton Karg, Realtor." He trailed rein at the hitch-rack in front of the general store, on the opposite side of the street.

Making a few inconsequential purchases, he soon saw the man in the flat black hat and the long coat emerge from his office. Out of the tail of his eye he saw that Karg had taken up his position at the edge of the sidewalk just outside the store.

Bravo Jim strolled forth. The speculator moved toward him. For the first time since he had seen Karg, the cowman noted a lame attempt at a smile on the deeply-lined face. The colorless lips crooked up at the edge, revealing a row of widely separated teeth. The effect was not pleasant even if the intentions were so.

"Morning, Bravo," he greeted stiffly. "If you were aiming to put me under bond—to

keep the peace—on account of what words we had the other day, why, it won't be necessary." A quiet sneer hung to the last of the sentence.

"I don't aim to put you under bond."

"I'm glad you're reasonable——"

"Because I'm not asking the help of the authorities to protect me or the Pole Corral, Karg."

The gambler's face betrayed no feeling. "We'll decide that matter later, Mister Calhoun," he said evenly. "Changing the subject, you gave me to understand the reason you backed down on the sale of the rancho was because you don't like me and the crowd I've been representing. That right?"

"True enough, Karg."

"All right. To show you I'm a straight broker, without any ax to grind in this deal, I've dug up another customer, and if you'll deal with her—she's a woman—we'll consider our agreement fulfilled, with no hard feelings."

Bravo Jim smiled sourly. "I've told you the Pole Corral is not for sale."

"But you might change your mind, when you hear the lady's proposition——"

"Thanks. I'm not open for any proposition." The ranch owner turned away, at the same

time watching the gunman from widely-focused eyes. Karg swung after Bravo, raising his voice:

"This lady has been sent for, and she's making a long trip to town to lay her proposition before you, Calhoun. Even if you're hell-bent against this deal, at any price, I reckon you owe it as a courtesy to hear this lady's offer. She'll be in my office at 11 o'clock sharp."

Bravo Jim Calhoun reflected a moment. "I'll see her, then, as a courtesy," he decided. "But you're wasting your time, Karg. Since you tried to gun-ride me, all deals are off."

When 11 o'clock arrived, the ranchman appeared at the realtor's office. As he entered, he saw a young woman of striking appearance—alert, winsome, intelligent, pretty.

CHAPTER X

Bravo's Reputation

"MISS FAY," as Karg introduced her, did not give any logical reason why she wanted the Pole Corral, but she fairly staggered its owner by offering one hundred thousand dollars, cash, minus the livestock.

"I'll have to think that over," said Bravo Jim, dubiously. "But I have told Mr. Karg the place was not for sale."

"I'll let you two talk it over in private," put in the realty dealer. He strolled outside and crossed the street.

Bravo Jim glanced at the girl keenly. She seemed guileless and honest.

"I don't like to be personal," he said, "but is this hundred thousand yours, or are you offering it for someone else?"

"I have plenty of money, sir."

"Were you sent here to make this offer for Dan Spellman, Karg or any of their associates?" he asked pointedly.

Her eyes did not fall from his searching

gaze. "I was sent here by friends, Mr. Calhoun, if you insist upon an answer. But I have been told it is the government that seeks your property."

"Would you mind naming those friends?"

A shadow blocked the doorway. Anton Karg moved into the office. He had circled around in the street and returned where he could hear what was said.

"I would not be free to do that," she replied, promptly.

"Miss Fay don't want it known she's buying this ranch for a big national health sanitarium," affirmed Karg, easily.

"No, it isn't that!" exclaimed Miss Fay, hastily. She looked at Bravo Jim strangely. "If you do not care to sell, that is for you to say. I just wanted to make the offer." She rose. "You can let Mr. Karg know if you decide to accept."

"I think I can decide now." Bravo Jim's level gaze met the chill orbs of Karg. He turned to the girl. "I'm sorry I can't take it, Miss Fay."

"Why?" asked the realtor, grimly.

"No reason given, Karg. That sanitarium lie of yours would be a good one, if one was needed."

The gambler's face hardened swiftly to a ghastly mask of hate. He backed a step, behind the little table. "Miss Fay, this hombre has insulted you. Would you mind stepping outside?"

Bravo Jim Calhoun remained facing the realtor. He knew that somewhere in his clothes the killer possessed a gun. In the cowman's open holster there was a weapon in plain view. The girl, alarmed at the tense atmosphere that had suddenly surrounded these two men, did not move. Bravo Jim spoke:

"The insult was directed at you, Karg. The lady was too fair and honest to misrepresent things. She's an innocent party to this deal—a mighty crooked deal——"

"A crook, is she?" ejaculated the gunman. He raised his voice. "You call this lady that, do you?" He stepped quickly behind the girl, and stabbed for his gun, the gleam of the killer in his greenish eyes.

Miss Fay, outwardly timid, showed herself a different being in a crisis. Without a sound, she struck with her right hand and hit the up-rising weapon on the moment of its firing. The roaring charge went wide.

Bravo Jim had, on the instant of the gunman's draw, produced his own six-shooter. But

Karg, with crafty foresight, had placed himself behind the girl. Thus the cowman's hand had been stayed at the moment Karg's shot went wild. And now, with the Eastern girl trying to seize the gambler's gun, Bravo Jim brought quick order out of chaos.

"Just let her take it, hombre," he said, easily, tilting his leveled weapon to the sinister eyes of Karg. "Now step over here. That your horse at the rack?"

The realtor nodded sullenly.

"Get on him. And remember I've got you covered—from here." As Karg obeyed the injunction, Bravo Jim turned to the girl. His usually smiling eyes were serious.

"You knocked up his wrist and sent that ball aside. I'd be dead now if it wasn't for you. I'm sorry to refuse you that deal, but if you can show me you want the rancho for yourself, I'll reconsider, and maybe sell, at a more reasonable figure." He took the gambler's weapon, which she had continued to hold after the disarming act.

"Thank you, Bravo Jim."

"If you want to take up this matter again, any time, why, I'll sure aim to be reasonable, without making a definite promise."

"The matter is closed, isn't it?" she retorted,

lightly. A slow smile crept up at the corners of her lips. "Especially since I have told you I was acting for other parties."

A desire seized the cowman to warn this girl against the men whom he suspected had sent her here. Quick to read character, he knew her to be without guilt in this ranch deal.

"I'm a fool, I reckon, denying you anything," he said, recklessly. "If it means much to you, personally, I'll try to come to terms. Why did you intercede for me against that fellow?"

The girl flushed. "I'd have done it against you, if you had made the first move."

"I understand. Well, I'm in your debt. I always try to square things. If you have any special interest in this matter, and if you represent somebody besides Karg or Spellman, I'll stretch a point, as I said."

"You're very kind. Just how far would you go, Bravo Jim?"

"I'd go pretty near the limit," he said, earnestly. "Even to sharing everything I have."

A little gasp escaped her. "Sharing? Are you doing what Mr. Karg charged, after all?"

"No, I wouldn't insult anyone—much less you," he declared, calmly. "I mean what I

say. The moment I saw you I knew I could look the whole world over and never find another girl as beautiful and sweet as you, and so ——”

“Be careful what you say, Bravo Jim!”

“I’m only a ranchman, but you can share everything I have if you’ll marry me. Nobody could ever love you more.”

“Heavens, but you Westerners are fast proposers!” The soft blue eyes held an amused laugh in them. “So matter-of-fact. Why, I don’t even know you! From the little I’ve heard, I have not learned very complimentary things about you.”

“My reputation is an open book on the Rio Grande, Miss Fay. It must be that Dan Spellman or this Karg was talking to you about me.”

“Well,” she said, tossing her head, “you don’t lose much time in making love to the first girl you meet— I’ll say that!”

Again the amused, not unkindly look. “Perhaps you are not as bad as you are painted. You were charitable, at least, in taking in that health-seeker the other day, but I don’t suppose you intend to keep him very long, do you?”

“What do you know about *him*?” demanded the cowman quickly.

"Oh, I heard about it. Are you going to keep him?"

"He'll stay as long as he wants to stay. He a friend of yours?"

"He probably never heard of a Miss Fay at the Double Diamond——" She cut off with an exclamation that told she had revealed too much.

"At the Double Diamond!" echoed Bravo Jim. "Now I understand. You're Dan Spellman's pretty—I mean, his niece that I've heard about! No wonder you came to me to try to buy the Pole Corral! Well, I can't blame you, personally."

"You had better look after the man you told to wait for you, Bravo Jim." The girl gestured toward the street through the open door. Looking around, the ranchman saw the tail of Karg's mount vanishing around the edge of the doorway.

Bravo Jim chuckled. From the office he watched the gunman speed at a gallop down the street. He had had no intention of holding Karg or preferring a charge over the attempted killing; he had at most intended merely to denounce him before the crowd that had been attracted by the shot, thus serving warning that the speculator was taking the initiative in gun-

play, if any should again be necessary. Karg, for the time being at least, was disarmed.

"Let him ride," laughed Bravo. "If he doesn't stop it'll be good riddance for the community. That hombre has been feeding your uncle up on some tale about big money here, in land speculation, gold in the hills or something, and it doesn't exist. If you're going to the Double Diamond, I'm traveling part way there myself."

Miss Fay was willing. A good rider, she had come in on horseback. She asked questions about the cattle business, Bravo Jim's holdings, the future of the Rio Grande Valley, how often Bravo Jim got away to El Paso—and did he on such occasions visit Juarez? And was Juarez as bad as painted?

"Bad or good—just as you take it," he told her. As for the valley, Bravo Jim declared he had not been an alfalfa farmer; he was not now interested in fruit or truck but would probably raise hay under the dam when the water was delivered. Time was when he had been willing to sell out before the valley filled up with the new type of settler, and move farther back into virgin cattle country. The Karg offer of seventy-five thousand dollars would have been taken quickly. But the events

of the last few days had made him suspicious. He might have given Dan Spellman more consideration had he known he was her uncle. "I reckon I was too hasty about him. I'll go over now and see him and apologize for treating him like a rascal. Maybe we can get together yet."

For a time she did not reply to this, and Bravo saw that she was lost in deep thought. Presently she drew rein.

"I must leave you here at the forks. Mr. Spellman did not want you to know who I was. I've got to tell you something, Bravo Jim, and ask a favor."

"Just name it. I haven't forgotten that bullet—won't ever forget it, Miss Fay."

"First, I'm really not Dan Spellman's niece."

"Not his niece?" The ranchman's eyes narrowed swiftly. "But you are at the Double Diamond!"

"A tourist boarder. The niece matter is just Mr. Spellman's little joke, told for the benefit of his roystering cowboys, who, it seems, love to torment tenderfoot boarders—'dudes' they call us. The reason I want you to know is that I am really interested in J. Rufus Renshaw, your new cowboy."

"I see." The man's tone was grim, strained.

"He has been very ill. I want you to promise you will look after him, keep him occupied—see that he does not get liquor. He is a fine type of man, the best in the world, except for that one weakness. That is the favor I'd like to ask."

"I can promise that, Miss Fay," said Bravo Jim, almost inaudibly.

"Also you must not let him know I am here. When the time comes that he is himself again it will be different. I came here to take him back to his family and friends, but he must not know that—now."

Bravo Jim did not speak for a space, his thoughts on what J. Rufus had told him about the girl who had broken the marriage engagement. "Of course, I'll do what I can. But this niece business—surely you wouldn't pose that way because of Dan Spellman's little joke?"

"Not entirely. There is another reason. If Rufus should learn of a girl of my description being at the Double Diamond, he would not suspect I was the 'niece.' I thought I could tell you, because I know you will help me in this, for Rufus' sake."

Hard lines had formed about the ranchman's mouth, but he forced a careless laugh. "I'll help. Your secret is safe with me. I'm mighty sorry I presumed to ask you to marry me, but I didn't mean it for any harm."

"Oh, I understand. I hope we won't be enemies, Bravo Jim, even if I am quartered at the Double Diamond." She lifted rein, and loped southeast with a friendly wave of a gloved hand.

Bravo Jim wheeled about and galloped hurriedly north.

"She oughtn't to be at the Double Diamond," he mused, grimly. He raked his brain, trying to think of another boarding place befitting her. His hands clenched taut at the saddle horn and reins. "Bravo Jim, it looks as though the nearest you can hope to get to a parson with her is to play best man at her wedding to some other hombre. Well, Rufus, you've got the stuff in you—if *you'll only make good with her.*"

CHAPTER XI

The Night Patrol

FRIDAY and Saturday passed; the calves, most of them of the April crop, had been branded on the left side with the double cross-hatch of the Pole Corral, ear-marked with the underslope, and thrown with their Hereford grade mothers into pasture, there to remain until weaning time in the fall. During the two days no further overtures for purchase of the rancho were made. "Just hold on long enough, and somebody'll raise the ante to a million," declared Baldy Carr, with a grin. "Must be gold or oil or something on this old rancho, shore-pop. Then our screw-worm troubles will be over with."

Next day, things began to happen. First, the wire fence of the main pasture, three strands held by posts twenty-five feet apart with staves between, was found cut in a dozen places. Since the pasture was virtually the fenced ranch itself, running from the valley up over Moon Mesa, it took all of a day to

determine the extent of the vandalism, and Bravo Jim's punchers put in a busy Sunday. The deed savored of petty persecution; yet it so happened that the cowman's pet plans for two separate breeding herds were put to naught by this act, for the south side of the destroyed fence adjoined the smaller pasture of the pure-bred herd, and, on the west valley end, of the pole traps of the bull herd, also broken down at places. It would take all hands working several days to get the fence repaired, and the segregation of the she-stock from the mixed herds would take longer. "Only reason I can see they done this was to make you b'iling mad," declared Baldy, his face scarlet with exertion and anger. Whole post-lengths of wire had been cut out and carried off somewhere.

No trace had been found of the missing Joe Hillis. That Joe had not left voluntarily seemed certain, for he was a distant cousin of Bravo Jim and had been with the Pole Corral from its earliest days. This Sunday a new clue was offered to Hillis' disappearance in the sudden unexplained absence of Felipe Garcia, likewise a fixture about the Calhoun establishment. He had been sent to the Puerco tanks Saturday to dam up a leak, had been gone

twenty-four hours, and Bravo Jim's riders had been unable to find him.

"Looks like our men were being picked off or something—deliberate," declared Baldy.

"Jim," said the ranchman's mother, earnestly, "what does all this mean? Surely this new neighbor of ours can't be trying to coerce us in this way! It has been years since anything like this has happened—but it makes me think of those dreadful days before father died!"

Bravo Jim tried not to alarm her, but he knew well the importees of Dan Spellman had committed the fence depredations. The deed had been done Saturday night; a considerable force had been guilty; wagon tracks were trailed toward the Double Diamond.

Monday brought another bit of persecution even while the fence was being repaired. J. Rufus, driving the wire wagon, mired himself down in a marsh in the lower end of the trap pasture, and while trying to pull the buckboard out, noticed a suspicious hulk of brown in the mud. He called the attention of Baldy to it. The foreman took one look, then rode hastily up the fence line to Bravo Jim.

"It's one of them three new registered white-face bulls," he said grimly. "He'd never got into that hole without being put there."

Baldy and the boys pulled the carcass out, washed off the mud, and found a hole through its neck. "That was done last night," declared Baldy, his squint-eyes hard as agates.

"Look!" commanded Mose Given, huskily. Another of the new Hereford bulls was lifeless in the mud. The third was found at the other end of the cienaga. All three had been shot.

"Boys, go on with the fence work," said Bravo Jim, quietly, and rode rapidly away.

In an hour he was at the old Chaves casa on the Double Diamond. Dan Spellman, his florid features placid and unperturbed, was standing in the doorway.

"Your Tehannos have been trespassing on Pole Corral range, Spellman," said the visitor, evenly. "They're courting trouble cutting fence and shooting stock. Better call 'em off. It's right dangerous. We'll talk settlement later."

"It couldn't be Double Diamond men, amigo," grunted the border magnate. "They were all home last couple nights."

"I'm telling you, Spellman. I don't talk twice in the same place."

"That a threat?"

"It's a mighty serious warning." Bravo Jim loped away.

Returning to the Pole Corral, he learned that Deputy Juan Escajeda had been out to see him and left word that he was wanted at the office of the justice of the peace.

Bravo Jim rode to town in the afternoon, and saw Judge Ingalls. "Karg's swore out complaint against you, Bravo," informed the justice. "Claims he's afraid of his life, you having threatened to shoot him. He wants you bonded to keep the peace. You stand bonded."

"Thanks, Judge." A grim smile was on the cowman's lips. "For your information, that's intended to give Karg an alibi for what he expects to do *to me*." Without further words, avoiding a counter threat, Bravo Jim left the office.

He understood Karg's move perfectly. Already information had drifted to him that the gunman had been talking in Chamizal, spreading the lie that Jim Calhoun had threatened to shoot him. Karg was getting ready to strike—and this latest formality of a peace bond showed that it would be soon.

As the Pole Corral boss walked down the little street, he took special notice of the fact that Karg's Real Estate office was closed. The dealer was on business elsewhere, perhaps at the Double Diamond. That Spellman and his

notorious agent were in collusion against him, Bravo Jim knew well.

The cowman thought of Miss Fay. He had not seen her at the old Chaves casa that morning, but he had taken note of the fact that she was not the only woman on the place. Yet he feared for her, was convinced that Spellman had encouraged the girl to go there with ulterior design. He had no doubt now that she had been used by Spellman in the renewed effort to purchase the Pole Corral.

He was not surprised to see her in town now. But he was puzzled at her actions when she walked toward him without apparent recognition, and, without halting, spoke aside in low tones: "Please watch out for that fellow Karg; he intends to shoot you!"

For some reason she did not want to be seen delivering this message, and Bravo Jim, grateful for the impulse that had prompted the warning, resisted the urge to follow and beg her to leave the Double Diamond, for her own safety's sake. He must do this later.

In another moment the stocky figure of Dan Spellman emerged from the livery stable and garage. He had seen the Pole Corral man going to the hitch-rack, and he strode over rapidly toward him.

"Hello, Bravo. Have you changed your mind about closing out the ranch?"

"Not any. You'll get that bill of damages in a day or so."

"You won't sell for a hundred thousand?"

"Not for a million—to *you*, Spellman."

"It's the last and final call."

"I'll see your cards, Spellman." The ranch owner rose to the saddle and turned his buckskin down the street. At the end of the thoroughfare he bent back again, and walked his mount leisurely through the narrow avenue several times. If Karg were here, this would be his opportunity. But the man in black did not make his presence known. Bravo Jim rode home.

He spent the late afternoon working on the fence repair with his employees. In the evening, with half of the wire back in place, he called Baldy Carr aside. "We'll put the boys on night guard, to see if there's any more of this kind of thing. You go with the first bunch. At midnight I'll bring the others and relieve you. String them out clear to the end of the mesa pasture, near the Chaves line."

He turned in early, sleeping in the bunk house with his men, saying nothing to his mother and sister about expected trouble. He

had purposely chosen the last half of the night for his own watch, knowing the chances were that an early morning hour would be selected if there was another invasion.

At midnight Bravo Jim's party, consisting of Ira Estes, Mose Given, and Bill Brand, with Tomas, Pancho and Billito, his three trustworthy native cowboys, pulled on their boots, mounted and set out for the relief. Trailing them was J. Rufus. The boss had not included the tenderfoot in either watch, knowing the gruelling first few days' work must be hard on him without loss of sleep at night. When Bravo Jim discovered him, he urged him to go back.

"Listen, Boss, I'm a regular cow hand here, am I not?" queried the Easterner. "And our agreement was that I was to do just what every other employe had to do around the ranch."

Bravo Jim liked the tenderfoot's pluck, and did not argue. He grinned at sight of the heavy six-shooter J. Rufus had strapped about his middle. The green hand was not to be outdone by his companions in any particular.

Bravo Jim and Ira, in addition to their Colts, carried rifles. One by one they relieved Baldy Carr's early watch. The foreman was at the upper end of the fence, near where the

foothills touched Moon Mesa. Bravo took his guard there. "Not a sound of anything suspicious," reported Baldy, in answer to his employer's question. "I reckon if they come, though, you-alls will see the fun."

An hour passed. The night was bright with stars and the moon, now flat-edged but still big and brilliant before the last quarter. It was the same shining satellite, a little later in rising, that had stirred Bravo Jim's adventurous nature at the roundup camp on the night of the wolf hunt. The ranchman had more serious things to engage his attention now than the marauding lobos. It was as though the curtain had been lifted again upon a scene of the outlaw days. Upon such a night as this the raiders had crossed the New Mexico line to strike at the rancho of Captain Calhoun.

Vaguely in the distance Bravo Jim made out in the chalky haze the faint outlines of Ira Estes' horse, commanding a wide draw. The cowman rode on his lonely patrol to the northward, ears and eyes alert for the range invader. The zest of the moonlight chase was gone, now that the mythical lure of hazard and antagonism had been converted into reality. It was not that the ranchman loved romance, conflict, adventure less; it was that these things

brought with them the drab ugliness of their criminal aspect.

Bravo Jim marveled at this paradox of Nature, at the elusive will-o'-the-wisp that defied anyone to seize the substance of satisfied achievement. He had longed for struggle, for eventful old-time perils on his modern rancho. Now that these had come, offering more of adventure than he had dreamed, he would have chosen the more tranquil, monotonous routine of his establishment. He was somewhat of a philosopher, realizing that the zest of life lay in overcoming obstacles, contesting with enemies, animate and inanimate. Existence would sink to the dead level of nonachievement with no evil to subdue. He admitted to himself that life was more interesting on the Pole Corral at this moment than it had been for ten years past. Evil, hazard, danger all had their place in the world. And while just now he would have preferred to have no neighbor foe seeking to destroy him, he knew the time would come, if he won, when he would look back upon the little war with Spellman and Karg with a certain relish. If he ever had sons of his own he would take pride in telling of the invasion of the Texans to Chamizal range and the mystery of their attempts to gain

possession of the rancho, even as his father had related to him many thrilling incidents in the more hectic days of the frontier.

How those stories had moved him! How he had longed for a return of those hectic times! Yet he knew now the prevalence of cattle thieves and bad-men on the border was by no means a pleasurable experience of his parents. How often too had he hung upon the words of his grandmother in telling of the Comanche raids and Indian fights in central Texas. With what zest too the old lady had recounted them, boasting that she had been shot through with an arrow and left for dead when a child. Yet those things were anything but alluring at the time they happened! Those were days of terror, for whose termination every frontiersman prayed. Such was the paradox of the will-o'-the-wisp—adventure.

On his lonely ride time and again his thoughts returned to the girl of the chestnut hair and the winsome ways. Her last action in warning him against Karg had affected him strangely; he tried to analyze her motives, not daring to attribute to her any personal liking for him because of the act. She would have warned anyone, he tried to tell himself. Bravo Jim would have given all he possessed to be

J. Rufus Renshaw, in whom this girl was so vitally interested that she had crossed the country to take up her residence where she could observe his battle against his one overpowering weakness.

He returned near to his original stand at the fence line. Presently, out of the night, he perceived a rapidly-moving rider take shape just ahead in the moonlight. It was Ira.

"There's cattle bein' moved a mile north in the draw!" he shot out, huskily. "Them devils never passed our line, but must 'a' come in from the north, 'round Pyramid Peak."

The cowman rode swiftly with the rotund puncher toward the draw. "I left Bill Brand below, to watch 'em, while I come for you," called Ira, as they rode. "Looks like they was bunchin' yore beef stuff, bein' out of the main pasture——"

After a time both men halted at once, ears straining. Out of the night, in the direction of the old ore wagon road leading to the Organs, came a faint screeching sound.

"Brakes," affirmed Ira. "A wagon up the draw!"

Bravo Jim was leading the way again. The sound had been a considerable distance away, judging from the night wind that would have

carried it from the old road on the opposite side of the depression. Suddenly the cowman tensed in the saddle, as an amazing noise came to his ears.

It was a prolonged, sinister drumming of distant guns; faint, then cascading louder with the wind, like the rattle of far-off rifle fire from a regiment. Once before on the Rio Grande had Bravo Jim Calhoun heard a sound like it.

"Goshamighty, what was that?" croaked Ira, his face ashen in the moonlight. "It—it sounds like a battlefield!"

CHAPTER XII

The Foe Strikes

“**W**AR, Ira—war.” Bravo Jim wheeled his mount, raced in the direction of the noise. Ira, his rifle jolting in his forearm, galloped in pursuit. “There goes them brakes again!” he yelled, hoarsely, as from the hill-side road a high-pitched screech came clearly to the ears of the riders.

The cowman changed his course slightly, went toward the nearest intruder, as indicated by the sound last heard. Presently his keen eyes caught the form of some large black object jolting over the rise ahead. He did not halt, but tore after the strange hulk. When he reached the rise with Ira the air was filled with dust, and a distant rumble sounded from the valley in the direction of Pyramid Peak. The black object had vanished.

“No waggin ever went fast as that!” gasped Ira. “It shore must ’a’ been a truck!”

“Where was that you saw the cattle being bunched?” asked Bravo, quickly.

“’Bout a half mile ahead—prit near under where this firin’ sounded, in the upper end of the draw.”

Leaving the fleeing truck for the time being, knowing from its speed that no horse could overtake it, the Pole Corral boss followed the rim of the mesa, which topped a high bank at the east side of the wide arroyo. At places the depression fanned out into a gently sloping swale, and from Ira’s designation of the scene Bravo Jim guessed accurately where the cattle had been bunched—at the same point where the drumming gunfire had sounded. The mysterious truck had got out of the draw farther south and was traveling on the mesa.

Soon Bravo Jim left the tableland and headed directly into the depression. When he got there, he found Mose Given and J. Rufus, and the sight that greeted his eyes was to stay with him until the day of his death.

Given and the tenderfoot were standing over a slain horse, the mount of Bill Brand, and all about them lay the brown and white forms of full-grown two-year-old steers; others were heaving and bellowing, struggling to rise, wounded. These that had escaped had stampeded over the mesa toward the foothills.

“We’d ’a’ shot them that’s suffering,” de-

clared Mose Given, "but we figgehed you'd think it was these heah Tehanner devils and open fiah. I'm a Tehanner myself, but I won't eveh claim to be from Texas again."

"You can't blame Texas for that, Mose."

Others of the night guard were arriving. Bravo Jim, his throat choking with grief and rage over the enormity of the crime, gave Tomas and Billito orders to put the most hopeless of the sufferers out of their misery, and turned with Ira, Mose and Pancho to hunt for the missing Bill Brand.

"He's either shot dead or mayhap bad hurt and crawled away," asserted Ira. "Them miser'ble, crawlin' snakes! If I on'y hadn't left pore Bill here alone!"

They separated, scoured the draw and the neighborhood tableland, hallooing the name of the missing puncher. The bright moon and the stars made the ground visible, and the country was open, mostly low creosote bush and scattered mesquite. For more than an hour the search went on. No trace of Bill Brand was found. Like Joe Hillis and Felipe, he had dropped completely from sight.

"They carried him away—mayhap dead," ventured Ira, rejoining Bravo Jim. "So's they wouldn't have to answer to murder."

"They'll answer." Bravo Jim turned the buckskin up the trail toward the mesa, in the direction of Pyramid Peak. Ira insisted on going with him.

"Bravo, what was it they done that slaughter with?" he asked. "It shore couldn't been anything else than a machine gun!"

The cowman gave grim assent. The pair reached the crest near where the brakes had been heard, and by moonlight and matches examined the trail, finally locating a pair of broad tire marks. Then they continued on the pursuit. They followed the road beyond Pyramid Peak, reaching there after three o'clock in the morning. At a point along the foothills, the tracks vanished in an expanse of black lava. It was too much to hope that the truck would be located now, and Bravo Jim was convinced that the attackers had left the road and turned back toward the Double Diamond. The chase was abandoned for the time being in the effort to find the missing Brand. The hunt for the cowboy continued long after daylight, without success.

Later in the morning at the Pole Corral ranch house Bravo Jim called his men together. "It's plain I'm being warred against, boys. The bunch holed up at the Double Diamond

are not content to strike at me alone, but are taking revenge on my employes. It's not right to ask you boys to make my fight yours, so if there's any man among you that feels his interests are not enough at stake to see this trouble through, I'll be glad to free him from all obligation."

Not one of them failed to rally to the call of Bravo Jim, J. Rufus Renshaw not excepted. "We can use only two of you to begin with," said the cowman, picking Ira Estes and Baldy Carr for an excursion across the ranch boundary. "Mose, you and Tomas take another pasear up around Pyramid Peak and see what you can find out about that truck. You might pick up the tracks beyond the lava."

"Who's that a-comin'?" shot out Billito, the boy wrangler, gesturing south.

"An automobile was skimming over the rise toward the Pole Corral, leaving a dust trail behind. It came forward swiftly, and Bravo Jim could scarcely believe his eyes when he recognized Dan Spellman and his gunman-killer Karg.

The big roadster bounded forward, and did not slow until it was in the ranch yard before the stern-faced riders of the Pole Corral. The car looked peculiar, and Bravo Jim saw that

around all sides of it had been placed a box-like frame of glass, windshield high. Its two occupants crouched low in the machine, their heads beneath the shield.

It was Karg who did the speaking, addressing the owner of the Pole Corral:

"We understand you're making talk, Bravo Jim. Just another threat that we can use in court in case of trouble. Folks already know you've made the promise to get me, and now you've added Mr. Spellman to your list. He hasn't raised a hand against you, yet—that cattle slaughter was done by someone else. But he's tired of this here talk, and if he's going to be blamed for making war, he's going to have a finger in it. Once more we're giving you your chance to go through with the deal you agreed to. What's your answer?"

Bravo Jim exchanged a glance with Baldy Carr. The Pole Corral riders spread out. "In case I tell you-all to go to hell, who'd you plan on killing next?" came the cowman's rejoinder.

"I reckon Mr. Spellman never makes threats," retorted the man of the cadaverous visage. "He's left the answer to me. It's a plain matter of shoot on sight, in that case, Bravo Jim."

"Boys, surround 'em," directed the ranch-

man, evenly. "We aim to hold you for the murder of Brand." He moved his mount a step forward.

"Instantly the big motor roared. It was thrown into gear and leaped, straight toward the boy Billito, sitting on his little black cowpony. The horse jumped. Bravo Jim commanded the car to halt. The injunction was ignored.

Bravo's gun spoke. He had directed his shot between the two men in the machine, a space so small that the hiss of the bullet would give them pause. But the car did not stop, and a strange thing happened. The leaden slug flattened against the transparent windshield, and fell to the ground. Again the cowman fired; again the bullet was shed by the shield, and Bravo Jim knew the glass was bullet-proof.

The car was roaring away; Karg's hand reached up over the high barrier, and Bravo's buckskin sank to the ground and rolled over dead. Only the gunman's unusual firing position above his head had spared the cowman. But Karg's hand raised again; another shot, and Billito fell from his horse. The car roared south.

Firing as he leaped from the slain buckskin,

Bravo Jim saw a tire burst and flatten, and shots from his punchers' guns exploded another casing. But the big machine sped forward in the dust of the range.

Fright-eyed and terrified, Bravo Jim's mother and his young sister ran forward from the house into the yard. "Bring water, Julie," begged Bravo Jim. He tore back the wounded boy's shirt, saw that he was shot high in the right chest, lifted him and carried him into the house. "I'll send for the doctor, Mother. Do what you can."

"Oh, Jim, what is the meaning of this!" exclaimed Mrs. Calhoun. "Why should they come here—shooting—killing—like that?"

"It's all a big mistake of some kind, Mother. But we've got to fight this thing out, to save not only our property, but our lives."

Tears were in the woman's eyes, but she pressed her son's hand, and Bravo Jim understood. He hurried out into the yard, past his slain favorite. His eyes were aflame with purpose.

"Boys, come on. We've taken our last licking. From now on, we run this war. We've got to give Dan Spellman and his killer a taste of Rio Grande justice."

CHAPTER XIII

The Law Takes Sides

ALTHOUGH the shooting incident in the ranch yard caused a slight alteration in his plans, Bravo Jim let the orders stand as given to Mose and Tomas to ride to Pyramid Peak to read sign on the trail of the death-dealing truck by daylight. Eight other of his hands, all native retainers on the Pole Corral, he left to skin the slaughtered steers and retrieve what beef they could. With Ira Estes, Baldy Carr and J. Rufus Renshaw, the cowman set off for Chamizal.

Within the half hour he had dispatched Doctor Peters to the Pole Corral to attend Billito, then hurried to Tom Jeffry's livery and garage. Naming a reputable make of automobile, he proceeded to write out a check.

"How long will it take you to deliver, Tom?"

"I'll have it driven up from El Paso inside two hours," promised Jeffry, delighted with the order.

The loss of his swift buckskin had affected the cowman deeply, and this, together with the introduction of the motor car as an instrument of warfare on the Spellman rancho, had persuaded Bravo Jim to acquire a machine of his own.

"Now, how can we hire a car for Cruces?" the cowman wanted to know.

After a wait a machine of a model familiar to J. Rufus was made available, and the four Pole Corral men reached the quaint old town of Las Cruces in less than an hour. Bravo Jim entered the office of Sheriff Lucero.

He related what had happened on his establishment in the last three nights. "I'm not here to swear out warrants or to ask your help, Sheriff," he explained. "I'm merely seeking legal authority to handle this bunch myself. I'd like you to make the four of us deputy sheriffs."

Finding Lucero skeptical, Bravo Jim went into detail about the charges: Pole Corral fences had been cut all around late Saturday night or Sunday morning. Three of the oldest employes of the rancho, Joe Hillis, Felipe Garcia and Bill Brand, had disappeared. Billito, the cherry-faced boy horse wrangler, had been wounded. Bravo Jim's favorite sad-

dle mount had been slain, in addition to the tried old cutting horse of Brand, three newly-purchased registered Hereford bulls and more than a score of two-year-old steers, the last killed by the mysterious rapid-fire gun that had evidently been brought onto the range by motor truck.

Lucero, an oily brown individual who held office through control of the native vote, smiled politely. "I'm sorry, Meester Bravo Jeem. These hombre, Meester Spellman, es a vera good friend to me. I would caution you that you do notheene rash. There es mistake about these a-charges. Meester Spellman es, you weel be surprised to know, *a goberment man*. That es a secret that perhaps I do not well en the telling, Señor. I canno' grant these request."

Bravo Jim understood the situation instantly, and he knew argument was futile. Lucero had been seen by some of the influences back of Dan Spellman—perhaps not bribed, but at least misled. The trip to Las Cruces had been time wasted. With his men he drove back to Chamizal. The new car was waiting.

"She's rarin' to go," sang out Tom Jeffry. "The man's here to give you your first lesson."

The cowman turned to J. Rufus. "I got this make of buggy because I heard you men-

tion you used one back East. Go to it."

The tenderfoot smiled, took the wheel. Acting as chauffeur was a new sensation for one who had been accustomed to having his own driver, but J. Rufus was working for wages now and delighted at his opportunity. The range was already making a new man of him, hardening him, brightening and clearing his eyes, rapidly wiping all traces of dissipation from his countenance.

"Ride out with the horses, will you, Ira?" Bravo Jim took his place beside the driver in the big new touring model, and motioned Baldy Carr to get in. "Who's that taking the Chaves road over there?" he asked Tom Jeffry, suddenly sighting a moving car toward the Double Diamond.

"Folks from El Paso. That's the fourth car that's went out since morning. More's comin'. Dan Spellman's givin' some kind of a house-warmin' party this evenin' in honor of his niece. Some big native politicians up and down the valley have been invited, too."

"H—m!" Bravo Jim withheld comment. Tom Jeffry now for the first time inquired about rumors he had heard concerning the disappearance of Joe Hillis and Felipe Garcia. He had not learned about Bill Brand, nor

about the slaughter of the cattle or the wounding of Billito. Bravo Jim, in a hurry to be off, gave him only brief, general verification of what he had heard, and the new automobile took the Pole Corral road.

Out on the level range, the ranch owner asked J. Rufus to exchange places with him. "I've never driven a car. It might come in handy pronto, before I have time to take regular lessons." The tenderfoot gave him instructions on the gear shift, brakes and accelerator, and after killing the engine a few times the cowman felt he could get along in a pinch. He managed to keep the engine running and the wheels on the road the remainder of the distance to the rancho.

Mose Given and Tomas had not returned from Pyramid Peak. To save time, Bravo Jim had J. Rufus drive him and Baldy out toward the scene of the murderous attack on the cattle, and thence on out the old ore road that had been taken by the mysterious truck. Beyond Pyramid Peak, a mile out in the sand dunes away from the lava beds, they found Mose and Tomas.

The big new car was driven out as far as the dunes. The two cowboys were still examining the trail. "We've read sign to heah," de-

clared Mose. "We haven't found wheah that gun-truck went, but we've located the direction it took, which is the same thing."

He pointed to the new tire tracks of Bravo's car in the creosote bush waste, and then indicated a spot ten yards to the left. "Now you see those smootheh marks theah," he said. "You've come out right to wheah the tracks of that gun truck ended, account of the dunes. Important thing is that gun truck left the ore road back theah a ways, and instead of goin' ahead in the same direction it was travelin' that truck turned off and started back towards the Double Diamond."

This indeed was important; in fact, it was just the thing Bravo Jim had suspected, and just the kind of proof he was looking for. "Are you sure it was the same machine, Mose?" he asked.

"Theah hasn't been anotheh truck oveh this road in a long time, I would judge. The marks are smooth—those tires if they were rubbeh were wore down so theah wasn't any tread marks on them. The tracks end right heah, and theah isn't any sign of the truck turning. Of course, the wind blotted 'em from heah on, in the dunes that's always shifting."

"Proof enough," declared Baldy. "But I

reckon the way the sheriff is acting we'd have to have a lot more certain proof about the hombres that killed the cattle. We'd have to name 'em personal, and bring in witnesses."

Bravo Jim had already reached his decision. "We'll take our prisoners first, and get the proof afterwards. Mose, you and Tomas ride back to the ranch and pack up a load of grub to Puerco Cañon—enough to feed five or six men. Don't tell my folks what's up."

"What in sin *is* up?" queried Mose, his big eyes popping.

"Soon as you get the grub up there, go back and help the boys with that slaughtered beef. If you see anything suspicious around the cañon, don't pay any attention to it."

With that Bravo Jim and his companions started back in the car. Evening was approaching, and the red sun was nearing the purple skyline of Picacho Mountain, beyond the Rio Grande. When the Pole Corral men reached the rancho it was dark.

Eating hurriedly, the little party, with the addition of Ira, embarked south through the starlit chamiza and mesquite of the middle valley. J. Rufus was at the wheel of the touring car, and the sole occupant of the machine, while the ranch owner, Baldy and Ira followed

closely on horses. A spare mount was being led for Rufus in case of emergencies. Bravo Jim had at the last minute decided to take the horses, for some rough going might be necessary before the night was over that an automobile could not negotiate.

There was an equally important reason for taking the car, which might be used for greater speed. J. Rufus had been instructed to drive slowly and cautiously to a point a half mile north of the old Chaves casa, now the dwelling of Dan Spellman.

One other problem had been faced by the Pole Corral boss in this expedition. J. Rufus must not see Miss Fay at the rancho. The tenderfoot cowboy now driving the car was invaluable in that capacity, for Bravo Jim was not yet thoroughly familiar with the controls of his new purchase, and the others knew less. Yet it was urgent that J. Rufus be kept away from the Double Diamond casa during the prospective visit, as otherwise he might discover the presence of the girl from the East.

Since Miss Fay had cautioned Bravo Jim against revealing her presence to the tenderfoot, the cowman intended to keep her secret. Undoubtedly she had a reason for not wanting to be seen here by the Easterner. If, as Bravo

believed, she was the fiancé of Renshaw, it might be merely a girl's whim to be near him without his knowing it, while he fought his battle against drink to regain his own self-respect. In this Bravo Jim did not see how she could help J. Rufus by being here in secret, but he considered this none of his affair.

Bravo had not forgotten the debt he owed her. She had interceded for him against Karg in the real estate office; she had risked Dan Spellman's displeasure later by warning the cowman of Karg's intention to shoot him. Because she had trusted him with her secret, the Pole Corral boss was in honor bound to keep it, and he had determined to "look after" J. Rufus, because she had asked it of him.

Hence it was that when the new car halted at the point designated in a little swale north of the Double Diamond headquarters, Bravo Jim gave specific orders to the tenderfoot to remain at this spot with the car, and not under any circumstances to approach nearer the casa.

With Baldy Carr and Ira Estes, the cowman rode over the rise on horseback, leaving the spare mount with reins trailing beside the automobile.

Within several hundred yards of the Double Diamond buildings and corrals he halted.

"We'll ride circle on this outfit first thing to find that murder machine," he directed. "Baldy, you go to the left, and Ira to the right. I'll go straight ahead. We'll meet at Tank hill, south of the rancho. Keep your eyes peeled for a truck with a suspicious-looking weapon on it. Work as near to the bunk house and sheds as you can."

The trio divided, and Bravo Jim rode slowly toward the ranch buildings on the slope ahead.

He singled out the long, white-plastered adobe, the casa of the old Chaves hacienda. It was possible the machine-gun had been taken into the patio or even the house itself.

Nearing the dwelling, set on a small rise among mulberry and china trees, whose fragrance reached the cowman's nostrils on the night breeze, Bravo Jim noted the presence of five or six automobiles, glistening in the starlight in the ranch yard. Beyond them stretched a double row of paper lanterns, whose candles shed a soft light upon the graveled roadway. The casa itself was alight from one end to the other, and a mellow haze of orange above the central patio told that lanterns burned in the courtyard also.

Bravo Jim walked his cow-pony toward the orchard, east of the casa, to avoid the horse

corral where a nicker from his own mount might betray him. The role he was now playing was not especially to his liking, and he made his preliminary investigation very brief. From the peach orchard back of the adobe he saw another machine draw into the yard, and its occupants, a man and three fashionably dressed women, move from it into the house. There was the sound of feminine laughter and the odor of wood-smoke and roasting beef. A faint white haze drifting upward revealed the barbecue pit at the south end of the casa.

Bravo Jim moved his pony out of the orchard and toward the long brown adobe bunk house. Except for a lantern over the door and a faint light within, there was no sign of activity here. Either Dan Spellman's hands were not holding a party of their own this night, or they had been invited to the casa with the other guests.

Back of the bunk house was a large hay storage barn, open at the sides and banked with the autumn's alfalfa crop. Around the baled hay there were several vehicles, buckboards and buggies, and farm implements. The Pole Corral owner dropped rein and left his mount in the shadow side of the barn, and went forward on foot. In a few minutes he had made cer-

tain that no motor truck was secreted about the barn.

From here he rode to the feed sheds at the upper end of the home corrals, and satisfied himself the mysterious truck was not there.

He had not been discovered, although once or twice he had seen cowboy figures crossing from the bunk house toward the barbecue pit. Now he loped briskly south, toward Tank hill, the meeting place agreed upon.

Baldy and Ira were both on hand, waiting, but instead of being on top of the hill or on the slope, they stood in the shadows of the cane brakes lining the acequia that fed the reservoir from the ridge.

"Look up thataway, Bravo," said Baldy, meaningly, motioning upward toward the sandy road that wound around the earthen tank. "We just was up there, but figured to wait here and watch."

Bravo Jim looked, and he saw the plain outline of a big truck against the starry sky.

"Means they must be gettin' ready to use that devil-gun tonight," asserted Ira, "or they wouldn't have that thing out there waitin' in the open road. But there warn't any gun on her, when we found her. And nary a soul around. I reckon they will bring that lead-

sprinkler along when they get ready to move."

Baldy Carr had an idea. "I don't sabe them machines, but I reckon we can put that wagon out of commission easy enough by uprooting every wire we can find in her. Better do that same now."

"That'll have to wait," said Bravo Jim. "If they found the truck had been tampered with, they'd know we were around, Baldy. You stick here under cover and see what they do with that thing. If they put a gun aboard and start rolling before you hear from us, fire two shots and beat it for the calf pasture gate. We'll find you there. If nothing happens up to 1 o'clock we'll fix that truck like you suggested.

The cowman turned his mount down the dark road. "Ira, you come with me to the casa. I reckon Spellman and Karg will be there at the party, and we need those two hombres in our business."

CHAPTER XIV

"The Colonel"

FOR a half hour Bravo Jim Calhoun had sat quietly smoking a cigarette in the darkened end room of the long bunk house adobe, the room used for the storage of saddles, bridles, spurs and such out-of-season wearing apparel as slickers and heavy coats. No window admitted even the faint light of the night sky, and the heavy door was drawn shut but unlocked. There was a chance of discovery here, Bravo Jim knew, but he was prepared if that should happen.

Leaving his horse down in the draw half way to the spot where J. Rufus Renshaw waited with the car, Bravo Jim had returned to the ranch establishment with Ira Estes; then, leaving Ira to watch the open-air barbecue at a distance, the cowman had entered the saddle room.

There was no urgency about events at the casa and the barbecue pit, at this hour, Bravo Jim knew, for he did not intend to make his

play while the party was in full swing. Just now he was more interested in getting information from Spellman's Texas ranch hands.

In the adjoining room, separated by a board-and-bat wall, footsteps had sounded from time to time during the hour, only to die out as some Double Diamond puncher had gone away again to rejoin his fellows at the barbecue. Dan Spellman at least was democratic in giving his unkempt cowboys a place in the night's entertainment. Either that, or he had considered it good policy thus to mollify those he had hired to do his fighting in this unexplained warfare.

Now, at last, it seemed, Bravo Jim was to be rewarded, for two of the Texans had entered the bunk house together, and their words, distinctly audible, had to do with the plans for this night.

"Why'd he bring up the Colonel, Dal?"

"What Colonel?"

"The hombre with the blinders on; yuh don't know who that gent is, Dal?" The puncher laughed. "Accordin' to Olie, he's straight out from Washin'ton."

"Yuh mean the hombre with them smoke glasses on? Danged if I c'n figger why the Old Man wants anybody from Washington hornin' in, Shorty. Mayhap he's calculatin' on

showin' him how pretty we pull this trick to-night, heh?" The speaker chuckled at his joke. "Mayhap. Nix."

"I cain't figger it," the other admitted. "But Olie knows. And he whispered to me awhile ago there was somethin' on tonight different from usual. I got my own idee."

"Yeah?"

"Uh huh. The Old Man is tryin' to cover up on this Pole Corral racket. Sabe the burro?"

"No, danged if I do."

"Listen, Dal. If the Old Man c'n steer the Colonel onto somethin' that'll show this Bravo Jim is the hombre that's been pullin' this stuff, it would make it a cinch for the Old Man, wouldn't it? Then there couldn't be no hell raised no matter how quick we cleaned that outfit, could there? And when Karg pots that lanky hombre, there couldn't be any stink raised, could there?"

The other whistled. "Shore sounds like yuh had it all learnt by heart, Shorty. She seems reasonable. What time do we bust into this bunch tonight?"

"I hain't heard. Here comes Olie Olquin—he'll know by now, I reckon." There was a sound of vigorous rubbing and brushing, and

Bravo Jim judged the punchers were shining their boots and sprucing up for the dance. A heavy footfall sounded in the doorway of the bunk house.

"Set down that bottle, damn yuh!" commanded a husky voice. "Cain't yuh wait till the party's over? There's ladies here. After the way the Old Man invited us-alls, and him havin' top-folks from El Paso here, we cain't get him in dutch thataway. Now you hombres stays out uh the patio when the dancin' starts. Understand? Yore breath kerries a mile."

There was no murmur of protest, no matter how much the foreman's discipline chafed Shorty and Dal. Big Olquin's word was law.

Bravo Jim pinched out his cigarette, a grim smile at his lips. He had heard enough to know that the Colonel, whoever he was, had come out to the rancho this night by prearrangement with Dan Spellman to be misled about some matter he was apparently investigating. Now Big Olquin threw further light on the subject:

"Soon as you-all get shined up, go over an' eat. But while that bunch hoofs around in the patio, you an' Dal set up the gun, an' see that she's got enough pepper for a real scrap. That bunch hits the Organ road about three a. m.

Clean 'em. And this time the play's on the level, because the Old Man has a big hombre here from Washington that he wants to show his samples to. I'll see yuh later. We ain't takin' the truck tonight—it's too danged slow." The three men moved away together, and the bunk house fell silent.

From under the china trees came the laughter of men and women and the strains of a little orchestra. Bravo Jim, having heard much that was enlightening and some things that were highly puzzling, moved toward the door.

He knew, for one thing, that he had picked a fortunate night for his visit here. There was something unusually important afoot, not only in connection with the barbecue and dance, but otherwise, and it had to do with the Pole Corral. The puncher addressed as Shorty had said as much. Who this "Colonel" was Bravo Jim had no way of knowing, but it seemed certain he was some sort of a federal officer or investigator. In this connection the unexplained incident of the badge, employed by Spellman, came to mind. Also Bravo recalled the statement of Miss Fay that she believed the government was behind the attempts to get possession of the Pole Corral.

That Spellman was not a legitimate agent of the government Bravo Jim was certain, for no one in so responsible a position would tie up with a killer like Karg, engage in a high-handed campaign of destroying property, killing livestock, and shooting down inoffensive ranch employes.

Bravo Jim was convinced the talk of the government's designs on the Pole Corral was pure invention, told for Miss Fay's benefit when she was sent with the offer of purchase. There was no reason on earth why Bravo Jim's cattle lands would be of use to the government. There was too much similar property to be had at a fraction of what had been offered by Dan Spellman.

Even if the unidentified Colonel should turn out to be an agent of Uncle Sam, Bravo Jim was convinced Spellman had brought him here on some mission of deception. If possible, the cowman determined to get the facts before this night was over. This had led to his decision to leave the bunk house forthwith and to learn the explanation of the festivities at the rancho.

He laid a hand on the latch. A heavy boot jolted the door inward, and a bearded puncher swung into the room, crashing with the Pole Corral cowman.

The collision had been intentional, at least on the part of Bravo Jim, for he knew that discovery here by the cowpuncher was unavoidable. So severe was the impact as the lank ranchman heaved into the invader that the newcomer bounded into the air with an astonished "woof!" When his boots hit the floor again, he let out a whine of protest. "Aw, cut it out, yuh lunkhaid! Cain't a hombre git his saddle without yore damned hossplay? Who the hell are yuh, anyhow?"

Bravo Jim chuckled, withholding a blow that would have felled the puncher. That was unnecessary, for the cowboy had mistaken his attacker in the dark for one of the roystering bunch belonging to his own establishment. The cowman with a coarse "haw! haw!" darted from the room, slammed the door shut, and glided around into the black shadows behind the bunk house. In a few moments more he was walking boldly along the line of dense-crowned umbrella trees toward the barbecue.

Already the lantern-lit tables that had been set end-to-end under the branches were deserted except by the Mexican help who were cleaning up after the barbecue. During the time Bravo Jim had been in the bunk house the feast had been served and the diners had

moved into the casa for the dancing. The strains of the orchestra now rose softly from the patio, the enclosed area within the adobe. Bravo Jim's immediate purpose was to locate Ira Estes. He avoided the gleam of light shed by the line of Japanese lanterns, and circled around the spot where he had directed Ira to wait for him.

He failed to find the chubby little puncher, and spent some time making a thorough search. Giving it up, he started for the casa alone.

Off to the left, in plain view in the light shed by a window, a couple of Olquin's Texans were comparing notes, and Bravo Jim glided close enough along the brush-grown acequia bank to hear their words:

"He h'isted me clean off my feet, and I thought shore as hades it was you, Dal. Ev'ry ranny here denies it was him, an' Dick an' Pedro has been over fixin' up the sprinkle-gun all evenin'. Yeah, that hombre shore was some spy, or else mebbe it was that coyote Jim Calhoun hisself. He was a lanky devil like that hombre, shore-nuf. Let's go get the boys an' make one grand pasear 'round the place!"

The one who had spoken strode briskly into the casa, and a minute or two later emerged with a half dozen Texans at his heels.

CHAPTER XV

Dan Spellman Entertains

THERE was at least one encouraging thing to Bravo Jim about this sudden hunt for the prank-playing foe who had thrown the now suspicious puncher into the air. That was the knowledge that the Texans had not captured Ira, for this had been the first time this evening that they had suspected a hostile visitor.

The Double Diamond punchers separated a few yards from the ranch house, and three of them streamed directly over toward the irrigation ditch where Bravo Jim had taken cover.

The cowman jumped the yellow waters of the acequia, moved through the tall carrizo growth, and down the far embankment, then rolled over prone in the alfalfa and waited.

"Aw, rats," he heard one of the searchers grumble. "Yo're drinkin' too danged much gin, Wallie—if any hombre slammed into yuh, which I doubts, it was Dal or Shorty or some'un. B'sides, it ain't every day rannies like us is invited to a reg'lar, honest-Injun

dance, an' I ain't aimin' to miss the fun."

"Have it yore way," grunted the other. "But yuh better give this here rancho a look-over."

The searchers passed on. Bravo Jim rose slowly and recrossed the irrigation ditch, moving nearer the casa.

Although the building was well lighted, doors and windows open to the mild night breeze, the cowman proceeded toward it as though he had a perfect right to be here. In fact, he assumed the role of a searcher for the "spy." Through the door leading into the big living room, the sala that had in the years gone by witnessed many a similar scene, he was able to glimpse the merrymakers who at the moment swayed to the dance in the patio. Continuing until he was at the edge of the pathway of light, Bravo Jim suddenly strode back toward a big sedan that had been parked in the shadows against the adobe wall.

If he were seen thus walking about openly he knew his garb would mark him as an ordinary cow hand about the place, and he took care that he had not been encountered face to face. He stepped to the door of the car on the shadow side and up over its top onto the tile roof of the casa.

In another minute he was over the ridge and down the inner roof overlooking the patio.

An object moved along the dark eaves across the open space. Bravo Jim crouched low, his fingers resting on the butt of his six-shooter. A hand raised cautiously on the other side and Ira Estes' rotund figure crawled toward him along the slope of the roof.

"Knowed you'd be here before very long!" whispered Ira, "this bein' the on'y grandstand seat. I got the lay; there ain't a hombre here armed. Now's our time to bust up the party!"

Bravo Jim laughed easily. "Time enough for that, Ira." His eyes searched the thronged patio beneath him. The three-piece orchestra had just struck up with a popular Spanish waltz. A score of couples, among them a half dozen or more elegantly-gowned women and three young señoritas in flashing red and black dancing gowns, took part in the baile. Cowboys in their best range regalia mingled with men in business dress, dignified dons and gallant young blades among the Chamizal natives who had flashed upon the scene in the role of caballeros and charros. Dan Spellman had arranged this party to make an impression both upon his southern guests and the natives of prominence.

"I don't see Karg, Ira," said Bravo, after a time. "You know if he's here?" He moved closer to the edge of the low roof, until he was almost within reach of the heads of the nearest dancers.

"Yeah, he's here some'ers, puttin' on airs fit to kill," grunted the puncher. "Him and Dan is both inside, I reckon."

Now the cowman saw that the merrymakers were in two groups, most of them in the patio gliding to the rhythm of the waltz, a smaller number in the sala engaged in some pastime like charades, as told by their conversation, and laughter, which at intervals rose above the notes of the orchestra. To Bravo Jim's surprise, neither Spellman nor Karg was on the improvised dancing floor, nor was one other for whom the cowman had anxiously scanned the gathering since his arrival—the fair honoree of the occasion, Miss Fay.

The orchestra terminated the waltz number. The couples broke away to the sala, where tinkling glasses told that punch was being served. Suddenly a vibrant figure in brilliant green and crimson striped skirt and silken black shawl thrown over a rounded white shoulder fairly threw herself into the patio.

A castaneted hand upraised, the orchestra

caught up her number, and the solo dancer whirled and pirouetted upon her silvered toes, abruptly held herself like a poised bird. She as suddenly caught up the movements of the dance again, her dainty foot stamped rhythmically with the beat of the castanets. Bravo Jim, eyes searching in the throng about the patio and in the sala for Spellman, Karg and Miss Fay, had scarcely observed the dance soloist, but now as he looked at her his eyes widened. This was not one of the Spanish entertainers brought here by Spellman. The dancer was Miss Fay herself, and the spectators were now extending an ovation by hand-clapping, enthusiastic shouts and the hum of voices everywhere.

Now a tall, slim male stepped forth; he was in the costume of the Argentine, low-crowned, straight-brimmed white hat, held over his black hair with a silken cord extending under the chin, a blouse of green velvet, a scarlet cape that swept the flagstones of the patio. The girl seemed uncertain of his purpose. With a quick move he held the fingertips of her right hand, pulled them to his shoulder, turned, and with astonishing grace placed her left hand against his shoulder. As he turned his head the orchestra responded, and Bravo Jim, looking

down from an oblique angle above, marked the ghastly features of the killer Karg.

If the girl from New York had resented this impromptu, enforced dance with the gunman, it was her good breeding that dictated restraint, for she went through with a modified performance that brought her wild acclaim, particularly from the Double Diamond cowboys. Miss Fay was every inch a dancer. Doubtless she had got her costume from one of the Spanish professionals, but it was certain she had studied the steps of the solo number very often before she had come to the Rio Grande.

At last Bravo Jim saw the girl's proud "uncle" escorting his brilliant "niece" into the sala.

Followed in turn other capable soloists, dark-eyed, olive-skinned, in every way finished performers, but none received quite the applause accorded the girl from the East, the one Dan Spellman's guests had come to honor.

Bravo Jim, on his perch on the sloping roof of the casa, had observed these things and wondered. The purpose of this night's gathering, far from being cleared up, had been rendered more mysterious than ever. The guests Dan Spellman had brought here were, for the most

part, people of refinement and taste; they wore excellent clothes, had come in good cars, and obviously had money. For the first time, Bravo Jim began to wonder whether, after all, Spellman might not be what he had pretended, a respectable mining and cattle king.

But the idea was discarded quickly; if the border magnate were on a legitimate mission, he would not have stooped to fence cutting, cattle shooting, and kidnapping or murder.

Bravo Jim decided that the Double Diamond boss had invited these people here for outward show, to make himself secure with the authorities, and, possibly, to mislead the Colonel as to his purposes here, if the Colonel were a government man.

As for Karg, the young cowman had felt his blood surge wildly at seeing him take Miss Fay unawares and press his advantage before the company. So far as the girl was concerned, this was none of Bravo Jim's affair, he realized. But Karg would bear watching, for the sake of the tenderfoot whom she had come to this arid region to be near.

The evening advanced; there were country dances, in which the Double Diamond punchers took vociferous part; there was a sort of costume revue, in which dignified ladies in mag-

nificent embroidered manolas, lacy black mantillas, satin slippers, and flourishing feathered fans, vied with the wearers of more humble rebozas among the native girls. The dominant note was Latin; Dan Spellman was proving an open-handed host, not without an eye to making a good impression on his immediate neighbors. Bravo Jim had seen several prominent natives with their wives and daughters, including Sheriff Alfredo Lucero.

At midnight the party began to disperse, the El Paso guests finding their motor cars and those living nearer taking horses, buggies or less pretentious automobiles. The Double Diamond punchers hastily withdrew.

As yet Bravo Jim had been unable to identify the Colonel spoken about by the men in the bunk house. But now, after the patio lanterns had begun to burn down and a young woman house-guest had retired with Miss Fay, Bravo Jim saw that four men remained together in the living room, and after a time he heard one of these being addressed as "Colonel." This individual limped, and Bravo Jim saw that he wore smoked glasses.

The others, he noted, were Dan Spellman, Karg and the Double Diamond foreman, the one called Big Olquin.

Ira Estes leaned over from his perch on the roof: "If you'd listened to me, Bravo, we'd got them hombres ridin' while they wasn't armed. But they got their guns strapped on now, because I could hear 'em liftin' 'em out uh a trunk or somethin' in that room, and I seen a couple shootin'-irons gleamin' when them last waddies crossed to the bunk house. It wouldn't surprise me none," he added, reprovingly, "if yuh was holdin' off deliberate, so's they would be heeled."

Bravo Jim frowned. "I reckon it would make us feel better that way, than to bust in on them when they didn't have a gambler's chance. But it wasn't exactly that, Ira. They're wearing those weapons, Ira, because they're getting ready for some kind of a play before morning."

"Shore they are. Wait a minute—I'll take a look an' see who's in there and who's got his pistols on." With that the pudgy little cowboy grasped the edge of the tile roof with both hands and leaned far over to look into the open door of the sala. Bravo Jim, lying prone beside him, did likewise. He saw Spellman, Olquin and Karg standing close together facing the Colonel. Every man of the four wore a holstered gun, and Karg wore two. Low

words drifted up from the open door into the patio:

"All set, Colonel? It's a little early, but we've got a good four miles to go." It was Dan Spellman who was speaking. "I reckon we'd better start, if you're going to see how these hombres work. Yeah, we know when they'll hit the Organ road, almost to the minute."

Ira Estes drew himself up, puffing from the exertion. "I couldn't see if Dan Spellman was heeled, but them others are. I'll take a look——"

He clutched the tile cornice again, leaned over, and at that instant two faint but distinct gun reports rose on the night from the direction of Tank Hill, Baldy's signal in the event the mysterious truck got under way.

"Grab me, Bravo—quick!" gasped Ira, clutching at a loosened tile that toppled with a dull thud into the patio. Bravo Jim reached out to seize him, but Ira slid downward head first into space.

His extended hands broke his fall, and his fat figure rolled ludicrously as though he were a cub bear. At that instant Bravo Jim saw three forms dart forward into the patio. Anton Karg was in the lead, and a gun blazed from his hip.

CHAPTER XVI

For Rufus' Sake

BRAVO JIM CALHOUN had no time to consider the signal shots from the direction of Tank hill, whither Baldy Carr was summoning him in connection with the mysterious, death-dealing truck. He saw the prone figure of Ira Estes in the dimly-lighted patio, on the heels of Anton Karg's swift attack. The gunman's weapon, trailing a faint wisp of smoke, lifted slightly as the little puncher collapsed.

Karg was moving forward toward the prostrate figure, his six-shooter still advanced and creeping down as though to fire again. Bravo Jim did not wait to see whether the gunman would follow his first shot with another, unnecessary as a second discharge of lead now seemed. The Pole Corral man's hand flashed over the edge of the tiling.

Bravo Jim's gun spoke once out of the darkness, and the long glinting barrel of the killer's Colt jerked downward to the impact of the

leaden slug from above, hammering the handle from the hand that held it. "Leggo that other gun, Karg!" snapped the cowman, as the gambler tried to recover with his second Colt. Karg's two hands went out and up, at sight of the muzzle of the big forty-five overhead, and at that instant Bravo Jim jumped from the roof through space.

Quickly, in mid-air, Bravo Jim caught the suddenly transformed attitude of the killer, for Karg's left hand swiped back downward to his one remaining weapon. The gambler had risked the attempt, seeing his menacing foe at a disadvantage while dropping.

Even before his booted feet touched the flagstones of the patio Bravo Jim fired, on the instant that Karg had reached the trigger. The gambler's gun emitted flame; the ball seared the cowman's cheek as it zinged into space. But Karg dropped within the second, like a sack of sand. Only the slug that had reached somewhere in Karg's gangling frame had deflected to a fraction the bullet meant for Bravo Jim.

It seemed a matter of minutes, but it was but a lone second that measured the time of the cowman's jump to the patio and the battle that had been fought with one man in air, the other on the ground. Karg did not stir, but Bravo

Jim's eyes were upon him and at the same time widely focused toward Dan Spellman and Big Olquin, standing now with hands elevated above their heads. The fate of Karg had put the fear of death into them at the moment they had started to swing into action.

With a quick movement, Bravo Jim bent and lifted the gambler's two guns from the flagstones within his reach, for he did not trust Karg, and he had seen the man stir. In another moment the cowman had the weapons of Dan Spellman and his half-breed foreman. The one known as the Colonel, who had been with the three when the shooting began, was not now in sight. Bravo Jim, his lips taut, turned toward his loyal little puncher, in the shadows of the patio behind him.

He was astonished to see Ira on his feet. The cowboy walked out chuckling. "That skunk shot his lead right straight through me," he grinned. "Th' same is what accounts for me bein' here an' alive this minute. If Karg warn't sech a plumb center shot, I'd been drilled shore pop. Now you hombres all guess how he done said ridic'lous feat!"

Bravo Jim was in no mood for humor; his immediate attention was directed to Karg, who rolled over and groaned once or twice, then

lay still again. Also the Pole Corral owner was watching the side room of the sala, where he was convinced the Colonel had withdrawn.

Bravo Jim stopped to look at Karg's wound; a trickle of red made a thin line over his ghastly features. Ira continued to chatter about the lucky shot that had saved instead of killed him. "I always carry a rabbit's foot," he affirmed, gravely. "Well, when I hit the patio, bein' kind uh porky like a cub bear, why I bounced. I lit again on my haid, an' was doubled up like a ball. And danged if I didn't feel that coyote's lead zipping right plump center through me—that is, said bullet hit the hole that was between my laigs an' haid, skip-pin' flesh an' bone. Doggone his hide!" He looked down at his ripped leather vest. "He's ruint my new buckskin jacket! Well, anyway, soon as I seed it was that killer a-shootin', I takes it easy and rolls over like I was shore daid—I plays 'possum. Holy sidewinders! That hombre's settin' up!"

Karg was not only sitting up, but he was rising slowly to his feet. A single glance had told Bravo Jim that the gambler had not been fatally hurt, but he did not know the extent of the injury he had inflicted. Now he saw that his bullet had made a mere scalp crease.

A girl's head, crowned in its wonderful golden chestnut, appeared around the doorway leading into the sala. It disappeared just as quickly. Bravo Jim had been watching that entrance for the Colonel, but that individual had not yet revealed his presence. Opposition from this quarter alone now gave the cowman concern. If the Colonel were a government officer, deputy U. S. marshal or the like, he would be a difficult person to deal with, for Bravo Jim, while alert for attack, had no intention to exchange shots with him. It was wholly likely that the Colonel was a bonafide officer, and if so, the cowman did not want to complicate matters. The thing that Bravo had come to do was about to be carried out, yet he did not intend to include the Colonel among his hostages.

Karg's head had cleared with surprising quickness, as told by the man's intent narrowed gaze upon his foe. Without making an effort to wipe the smear of crimson from his ghastly countenance, the gunman spoke in loud, challenging tones, obviously designed for the ears of someone farther back within the casa:

"Come to carry out your threats, did you, Bravo Jim Calhoun? I wouldn't advise you to commit murder, because there's a federal

officer in the building, and you'll sure swing if you do."

If the Colonel had heard the remark, he did not show the fact by making his presence known. Karg's object, of course, was to reveal the identity of the intruders.

Bravo Jim, having in mind the signal shots from Baldy and realizing the need for haste, made no direct rejoinder. Instead, he commanded Karg, Spellman and Olquin to march out of the patio through the old wooden gate, now standing wide open.

"What's this mean, anyhow?" demanded Dan Spellman, his florid countenance redder than ever. "We are in no mood for trifling, Calhoun!" The Double Diamond boss had halted, defiant.

"Keep moving, right along!" warned the young cowman, his gun barrel tipping up quickly. Out of the corner of his eye he had caught a glimpse of a skulking figure along the adobe wall, a man in chaps and broad Stetson hat. One of the punchers from the bunk house, this. There must be others around, and Bravo Jim knew they had certainly heard the shooting in the patio. Only the summary manner in which the two Pole Corral men had handled the situation within the court yard

had prevented an attack from without before this. Dan Spellman was playing for time now, trusting to his punchers to lend aid.

Bravo Jim handled the danger from an ambush speedily, placing the three prisoners in a line with himself and Ira and marching the trio close to the adobe wall toward the south end of the hacienda. If the punchers opened fire, their own men would be exposed.

At this juncture a young woman in a heavy wrap emerged from the patio gate and ran toward them. A few paces behind, moving at a painful limp, aided by a cane, was the Colonel. Back at the gate, another young woman—companion house-guest of Miss Fay—peered anxiously out into the night.

Directly in front of Bravo Jim the Eastern girl halted. "What are you going to do?" she demanded, sharply.

The cowman looked at her steadily. "First thing, ma'am, I'm going to warn you to leave this rancho. You're not the kind of a girl to be mixed up with a den of thieves and killers. These hombres are plumb bad, from Dan Spellman down—and they've been using you and some other good folks to mask their deviltry."

The Colonel had halted fully fifty feet away, whether through fear or for other

reasons Bravo Jim did not know. The girl moved a step closer, shook a finger in the cow-man's face. "I don't believe it," she said, heatedly. "By what right do you come here this time of night—shooting and intimidating people? Where are you taking these men?"

For answer Bravo Jim walked close to her, leaving Ira Estes to hold the prisoners. "I'll tell you," he said, grimly, and with a sudden movement swept her into his arms. He strode back a dozen yards with the kicking, infuriated girl, set her down on her feet, and held her wrists as she strove to break away.

"Now you've got to listen to me, where those hombres won't hear," he said, earnestly. "That bunch has cut my fences, killed thousands of dollars' worth of my cattle, and shot or drove off three of my men. You don't care about that, of course. These fellows have been filling you up with lies about me—part of their trick. I wouldn't care a hang about that, either, if it wasn't that you're in danger among such a crowd."

His tone softened. "You've got to get out of here, for the sake of that chap you're going to marry. If I told Rufus you were here on this Double Diamond, he'd come a-shooting pronto, because he's pitched in with Jim Cal-

houn on this deal to a finish. Now go back and remember what I say, or sure-pop I'll have to send Rufus over here to look after you before another day's out!" He released her, hesitated a moment. "I'm sorry I have to make such a threat, but it's for your own good." The moon had climbed the mesa line; its soft glow lit the girl's alluring features; her eyes were large and troubled and held no resentment over the ranchman's act. Bravo Jim turned away from her quickly, moved toward the prisoners.

"Don't go! Just a moment." She clutched at his shirtsleeve. "I shouldn't tell you, after the way you just acted! But I came out here hoping to be able to inform you of something—I did not want it to appear that I was helping you! There is a big smuggling ring operating, and these men are trying to connect you with it. Colonel Lazure is a federal officer here investigating. I know you are not guilty. But they are trying to get false proof against you. From some things I overheard, I believe this rascal Karg is the head of the smugglers himself, and I believe he wanted your ranch for some reason in connection with his law-breaking."

Bravo Jim's eyes glowed strangely in the

starlight. "You are a—a wonder. I won't ever forget this kindness."

"There is to be some sort of a raid tonight—you had better take care that you do not fall into their trap. Look! We are being watched by those two cowboys!"

"Come on quickly." Bravo Jim started back hurriedly with the girl toward the prisoners. "Get away from this rancho in the morning as soon as you possibly can!"

She was running hastily toward the patio gate, where the other young woman remained waiting for her. Bravo Jim watched her a moment, saw that she entered safely. The Colonel had vanished. A sidelong glance told the cowman that at least two of Spellman's Texas renegades still lurked in the shadows of the hacienda.

A jet of flame stabbed the darkness. Bravo Jim flung himself to the ground, firing as he did so, oblivious to the sharp, knife-like pain under his left arm. Another gun spoke near the first attacker, and the Pole Corral man gave answer to the spot whence the spurt of fire came. He saw a shadowy form fleeing around the corner of the casa wall.

CHAPTER XVII

A Hard Decision

RUNNING forward to reach the wall before the marauders would have a chance to renew an ambushade, Bravo Jim collided full-tilt into a slim wiry figure that rose up suddenly before him, out of a clump of greasewood.

"It's me—Baldy!" gasped the foreman, sitting ungracefully back into the sand at the moment the young cowman was reaching out for his throat. "I saw that skunk creeping over by the wall to pot you, and I let him have it. Yore lead come a-zinging past my ears. I never saw such rotten shooting—I mean my shooting and his'n, because he kept a-hustling behind that wall!"

"Come on—we'll find him! Go that way!" Bravo Jim sprinted to the upper end of the enclosure, leaving the other for his foreman. He would have asked many questions of Baldy, concerning the number of Spellman's punchers about the place, about the signal shots the

wrinkled foreman had fired concerning the truck, but there was no time for this now.

At the corner of the adobe wall Bravo Jim halted. A voice hailed him. "Don't shoot, waddy; I ain't scrappin'!" Down along the west side of the enclosure the cowman saw a form leaning heavily against the adobes. Dimly revealed were his uplifted arms. In another moment Bravo Jim had reached him, and extracted the six-shooter from his holster.

The man wobbled, sat down. "I'm sick as a dawg—in the stummick," he informed, huskily. "Yore lead knocked me fer a goal."

"Hurt, eh?" The Pole Corral owner yanked back the puncher's vest. He did not know whether it was his shot or Baldy's that had reached this man who had attempted to slay him from the shadows. The fellow gulped, got to his feet. "I'm plumb seasick."

"You're not ventilated, hombre," said Bravo Jim, puzzled at finding no trace of a wound. His own bullet-hurt under his left arm smarted considerably.

"Naw." The fellow leaned over and vomited. "I was kerryin' my saddle, holdin' it up in front uh me fer a shield. Yore lead plugged into my kack, I reckon, because it felt like somebody hit me in the stummick with a

sledge hammer. I reckon my saddle ketched yore lead. Dallas Tucker ain't never had any better use for a kack!"

"Get along; you'll keep," commanded the captor, as Baldy Carr came gliding around the other corner of the casa.

The bunk house was dark, and it was certain there were few if any men there or at the casa; otherwise the firing would have aroused them. Bravo Jim ordered Dallas Tucker to step ahead, and slowed to have a word with Baldy.

"Reason I fired the two signal shots," explained the foreman, "was on account of that truck moving. Six hombres come up and got onto her and drove her towards High Mesa. But they didn't have any more devil-gun on her than a rabbit. Looks like they was going to haul something, because that old gas wagon ain't made for speed. I dunno what. Then I heard yore guns a-smoking down thisaway and figured I'd horn in."

"Glad you came," said Bravo Jim, cheerfully. "We've got the brains of this outfit corralled, and I don't reckon they'll be much devilment tried tonight. Anyway, we'll find out. Take this hombre ahead this side the peach orchard, and you'll find Ira there with another bunch. Wait till I come."

Bravo Jim dropped behind, and turned around the casa wall toward the bunk house. He advanced to the long adobe building, found the main door wide open, and entered. Satisfying himself there were no other Texans secreted about the place, he hurried out. It was significant that so few of the Double Diamond hands were now in evidence. They had not left the rancho through fear, Bravo believed, but had gone forth on the mission that Big Olquin had outlined for them this night.

The Pole Corral boss gave no thought to his own hurt. While the flesh wound had bled profusely for a time, it was beginning to clot up with his undergarment, and he knew it would not incapacitate him. He cut over through the orchard to rejoin his two employes and the prisoners.

Karg, sullen and defiant, had been engaged in a chewing match with Ira, and he was still at it, now with Baldy and Ira both. When Bravo Jim arrived, the gunman turned the venom of his sinister tongue upon the ranchman. "Planning a pretty trick tonight, ain't you, Calhoun? We don't happen to be blind, hombre, and we sabe why you drew Miss Fay away to lie to her."

"Be careful how you talk, Karg."

"We ain't blind," went on the gambler. "We saw you watching her into the casa. We know why you hid out on the roof tonight, to spy on our women. When you was in my office and insulted Miss Fay, I could see you was hell-bent on getting your bridle on her. We sabe what you're taking us away from the casa tonight for, Bravo Jim."

"Why?" asked the cowman, his jaw hardening.

"So's you and these other two can help yourselves to those pretty girls. You taking Mr. Spellman's niece, and——"

The words were chopped off in his throat, for the hand of Bravo Jim was about the slim, putty-colored neck. Slowly the cowman released him. "Next time you mention her name, I'll hammer you into a pulp," he warned the realtor, gravely.

"Well, anyhow, you're sitting on dynamite," snarled the black garbed one. "You wouldn't try a stunt like this if you knew who Dan Spellman is."

"Who is he?" asked Bravo Jim, curiously.

"He's somebody that's got the power to land you in the penitentiary, Bravo Jim."

The cowman laughed. "What's the matter,

Spellman? Lost your tongue? Seems like Karg's doing all the talking for you!"

The border magnate disdained reply.

"Well, boys, it's time to move. Step along, right down the draw."

"Where you taking us?" demanded the gunman, sullenly.

"Where you won't shoot any more folks—or cattle," informed Bravo, cheerfully. "Baldy, you can go back and fetch the horses. Meet you down where Rufus is waiting."

The procession moved ahead on foot.

"Tramp, tramp, tramp, the boys is marchin'," intoned Ira, stalking the prisoners.

"If you're figuring on a kidnapping play, you're sure honing for trouble," flung back Anton Karg.

"Trouble?" Bravo Jim laughed cheerily. "Trouble's already started. You and Spellman set it a-going. Now we'll finish it! From now on, *we crave trouble, gentlemen!*"

In the draw ahead a glistening black object loomed up in the darkness. Brave Jim marched the prisoners over to the waiting Rufus, in the new touring car.

"Now pile in, hombres," directed the cowman. The four prisoners found comfortable seats. Bravo Jim waited until Baldy arrived

with the horses, then mounted with Ira and the foreman.

Taking the lead with Ira, the Pole Corral owner set the pace for the car, with Baldy riding behind. For some minutes the procession advanced in silence. After a time low words were exchanged by the occupants of the machine with one another. Bravo Jim heard Karg murmur something about being taken toward the Organs. Suddenly Dan Spellman rose up in the car.

"We've had enough of this, Calhoun! I reckon Mister Karg was wrong accusing you about the girls, but this joke's gone far enough."

"It don't happen to be any joke, Mister Spellman." Bravo Jim directed J. Rufus Renshaw to keep the car moving steadily ahead.

For a full hour the caravan, riders and car passengers, continued to cross the range, the moonlit mesa, the foothills at the lower slopes of the Organs, beyond Pyramid Peak. From forty-one hundred feet the party climbed to fifty-one hundred. They had entered a rocky cañon, bleak and bare except for Spanish dagger, cactus and granite. With difficulty the car negotiated the shadowy pass. Years previously there had been an ore road here, and while speckled

up with spiny desert growth, it was passable. Presently Bravo Jim halted his mount in a narrow gorge in the hills.

"Get out," he ordered the prisoners. "Make yourselves comfortable. This will be your home for a spell."

"Look here!" cried Spellman, in alarm. "What's your game, Calhoun? Ransom money? If so, I warn you——"

"No ransom, Mister Spellman. I just want to see how quiet and peaceable Chamizal range can be with you devils taking a vacation here in the hills. When Karg's trial date comes, I'll take him to town."

"Scared of us?" sneered Karg, stepping down in the darkness.

"Not any. Just got the notion there'll be a bunch of Tehannos dust out of the country when their boss doesn't appear on payday to make it right for shooting down cattle and men. It'll cost me something to feed you hombres here, but it'll be economy in the end. Maybe we can make a deal after six months or so."

Dan Spellman's blocky features sagged in the moonlight. "Name your price, Calhoun. If not too high we'll make the deal here and now."

Bravo Jim laughed softly. "I might do that little thing, too," he mused. "Mister Spellman, your Tehannos shot or manhandled three of my employes, not counting poor little Billito. We can negotiate if you will bring Joe Hillis, Felipe Garcia and Bill Brand here to me, alive and well, and pay for the slaughtered cattle. Fact is, I might let you all go if you do that. I reckon you'd figure that an equal exchange of hostages, Spellman, considering your own hide is included?"

The border baron's eyes glistened in the gloom. He looked at Karg. Presently he walked aside, asked to talk with Bravo Jim alone. He discarded his mask of innocence completely.

"Either the Double Diamond or the Pole Corral has got to leave the Rio, Calhoun. We raised the ante to a hundred thousand to avoid war. You wouldn't take it, and we made war. It won't do any harm for me to say it, because there's no witnesses, and your word against mine in court wouldn't hold a minute. Do you reckon you'd be willing to start over even, man for man, if I'd bring back Hillis, Garcia and Brand?" He said it as though he were discussing a tally check at a roundup.

The young cowman's lips straightened in a

taut line. "You've got 'em, then, and alive?" he countered.

"Will you make the deal?"

"You're wanting three renegade leaders, Spellman, Karg and Olquin, not counting that seasick puncher, for three ordinary cow hands," said the Pole Corral man, musingly.

"I figured you'd back away," grunted Spellman. "I'll pay you hoof prices for all the hides you show in that cattle killing. But you was saying back there you craved trouble."

The taunt did not go home. Bravo Jim made his decision: "I'll take you, Spellman, on condition those three hands of mine aren't hurt. You to bring 'em here to me, first."

"How do I know you'll not double-cross me, Calhoun?"

"You know the man you're dealing with, Spellman."

It was arranged. To Bravo Jim's astonishment the Double Diamond boss offered to bring the prisoners here to Puerco cañon within the half hour if Bravo Jim would send J. Rufus with the car to get them. Karg alone could negotiate the transfer, he declared. The gunman, still unarmed, started off with J. Rufus within a few minutes.

The car had no more than vanished in the

gloom of the gorge when, a scant mile below, a terrific rattle of gunfire came to the ears of those in the cañon.

It was the same sound, though nearer at hand this time, that had been heard on the occasion of the slaughter of the cattle herd—the drumming of the mysterious rapid-fire gun.

To Bravo Jim Calhoun came sudden recollection of the words of Miss Fay, that Colonel Lazure had come here to investigate smuggling activities. This gunfire could not be far from the ore road east of Pyramid Peak. The cowman recalled also what Baldy Carr had said about the truck at Tank hill. Six men had left with the big freight automobile near midnight. They had not taken anything with them that could have been a machine gun, Baldy had insisted. But others must have joined them.

Bravo Jim and his foreman discussed the matter quietly, out of earshot of the captives. "Who'd they be fightin', even if they had that devil-gun?" Baldy wanted to know.

"Might be they've run into a band of custom officers, though I don't believe the guards ever hunt their quarry this far from the border."

"I cain't figure it," declared Baldy, shaking his angular head. Bravo Jim was as mystified. He recalled what had been said to the Colonel by Dan Spellman. Had this machine gun attack been staged for the benefit of Lazure, to make him believe Bravo Jim was engaged in smuggling?

The foothills were silent now; there had been but one long-drawn-out fusillade. Time fled. Without a watch, Bravo Jim knew the hour was near dawn.

He was becoming suspicious about Spellman's promise to bring the three Pole Corral punchers to this spot within the half hour. An hour had now gone by. Even that length of time, however, was short if the trip had to be made through the rough terrain of mountain and foothills to the Double Diamond home base.

Dawn flushed over the rocky defiles of the mountains. Abruptly, for the first time, Bravo Jim's eyes caught sight of an automobile standing at rest at the mouth of the cañon!

How long the car had been there he did not know, but it may have been for a considerable time. Its present position, backed up against the wall of the gorge, indicated that the machine and its occupants had not just arrived.

Nor was it Bravo Jim's machine, in which Karg had left for the three Pole Corral hostages. Instead it was the blue roadster of Dan Spellman, the same car that had driven into the ranch yard the day before and shot down the boy Billito. Now, as then, it was equipped with the transparent, bullet-proof shield that had been built in box-like shape around the open body.

As the light rapidly increased, Bravo Jim's eyes contracted at the most amazing thing about the roadster—the presence of Anton Karg at the wheel, although he had left in the other machine. Five men were in the car or on the running board.

Karg's position was under the protective shield, and crowded into the glass compartment with him were two cowboys whom Bravo Jim did not recognize at that distance, nor did he believe he would know them at closer quarters, for they were doubtless a pair of Spellman's Texas importees.

Last, but more reassuring, Bravo Jim saw the three hostages for whom an exchange had been arranged. They were standing on the running board of the car, Bill Brand on one side and Joe Hillis and Felipe on the other. And all three of them were blindfolded.

The reason for the blindfold was plain. These Pole Corral prisoners had been held somewhere very close to Puerco cañon, and in bringing them here Karg had covered their eyes so that they would not be able to guide Bravo Jim back to their hiding place, doubtless the rendezvous of Dan Spellman's smuggler law-breakers.

Although the prisoners' hands were free, enabling them to maintain precarious hold of the car during the journey here, they had made no effort to free themselves from the big bandanas that bound their eyes—probably because they had been told they would be shot if they did so. Now Anton Karg rose in the car and yanked the handkerchiefs from the prisoners' eyes.

"Well, Bravo Jim, you see I've fulfilled my end of the contract," announced Dan Spellman, striding up. "If you're willing, we'll all go down there and make the exchange. Olie and Dal and I will take the places of your three men."

The cowman's eyes shot with suspicion. "Where's *my* car?" he asked, pointedly. "And the driver, Rufus?"

"I'll ask Karg. I reckon it must have broke down or something, and the boys had to bring mine."

Bravo Jim, Ira and Baldy marched Spellman and the other two toward the car.

Before they had got half way, Karg spoke to Hillis, Felipe and Brand, and the three prisoner punchers started up the cañon.

They had gone perhaps ten yards along the south wall of the gorge when Karg called a halt. In loud tones he added: "You're dead men if you move another step."

At the same time a tripod raised in the roadster, and it bore just over the shield a formidable mechanism that explained the rattle of gunfire in the foothills an hour before. Bravo Jim, with a movement as quick as thought, produced his long-barreled forty-five.

So intent had the cowman been on the menace of the rapid-fire gun that he had not observed the leisurely movement of Spellman and his two confederates toward the north wall of the cañon. As Bravo's six-shooter leaped from its sheath, Karg's chill voice delivered an ultimatum:

"Your men will be shot, Calhoun, the minute you squeeze the trigger. Besides, your fire won't go through this bullet guard. You'll notice this big lead-slinger is trained on a straight line with your three waddies near the car and you and Baldy and Ira down the side

of the cañon. You'll notice, too, that Mr. Spellman, Olie and Dal are ten feet out of line to the left, and all we've got to do is to lay down a barrage between you, or mow you down."

He turned his eyes to the left. "Now, Mr. Spellman, you and the boys can move right down the gorge and swap places with these other waddies like we agreed."

The cadaverous countenance lighted with one of its rare and ghastly smiles, and Bravo Jim perceived that even if the transfer were made as ordered, there would be nothing to prevent the turning of the machine gun upon the men of the Pole Corral. That Karg and Spellman had planned this betrayal was certain. Puerco cañon itself was a trap at this point, its high precipitous walls making withdrawal impossible. Karg had selected the parking place for his blue roadster with exceeding care!

The two renegade punchers in the car held themselves in crouched position, the mechanism of their upraised, bug-like weapon in readiness.

CHAPTER XVIII

Spellman Explains

HILLIS, Felipe and Brand, punchers of the Pole Corral, had raised their hands at the call of "Halt!" from Karg, who was still ensconced within Dan Spellman's blue roadster beside the machine gun.

Bravo Jim, against the south wall of the cañon with Baldy and Ira, during the tense moment of the command, stood still. He realized the situation was a critical one and that he and his men were virtually prisoners, since Puerco cañon was a blind gorge, a cul-de-sac whose precipitous sides and granite-walled upper end afforded no exit, even had there been an opportunity to make a break. Bravo himself had selected this spot for a prison in which to hold Dan Spellman and his Texas renegades.

Karg, too, was fully aware of his advantage. That he had familiarized himself with this part of the mountains was shown by his knowledge of the road in and out of the cañon, and his method of blocking the entrance with the

automobile. This fact told Bravo Jim much: Karg had picked this same site or one very close to it, as the rendezvous of the mysterious ring of which he and "the Old Man" were the brains.

The whole scheme of exchanging prisoners had been a ruse, enabling Karg to bring up the battle car. The tables had been turned with startling suddenness. Should the Pole Corral boss elect to fight it out, he knew his three employes, hostages, would be shot down.

"What for you holding your shooting-iron with its nose to the ground?" taunted Karg, with a thin chuckle, glancing toward his two machine gun experts under the bullet-proof shield. "If I was you, I'd pouch it. Smoke carts like that have gone out of date. I admire your judgment, Bravo, not to start anything that would make mincemeat out of your men.

"Listen," he went on, "I'll tell you something! The exchange of hostages is still going to be made. But it'll be a swap with teeth in it. A one-way swap. We aim to trade places, and instead of you holding the boss of the Double Diamond and his top hands, we aim to hold the boss of the Pole Corral for a spell—with enough of his amigos to keep him company! How's that?"

Bravo Jim did not give answer; his narrowed eyes flitted from right to left, canvassing his chances. They were nil. At this moment Hillis, Felipe and Brand were in the direct line of fire of the gun mounted in the automobile, and behind them, some fifteen yards farther back, were Bravo Jim and his two other employes, all six on the south side of the cañon wall and in the pathway of gunfire if the death-dealing weapon in the car should open up.

Spellman, Olquin and Dallas Tucker had started walking briskly toward the roadster, where they were to take their places on the running board vacated by the three Pole Corral punchers.

One desperate chance had occurred to Bravo Jim, an attempt to cover Dan Spellman and force him to call off the machine gun crew. But the notion was discarded by the cowman when he read the purpose in the killer's eyes. Karg was as much the master here as the Old Man, and the lust for unequal battle was in his heart. Bravo Jim's loyal cowboys would have paid the price had the ranchman raised his weapon. He trust it back into its holster.

There was one more possible complication that might afford a chance for a break. If the

newly made prisoners were to be moved elsewhere, Spellman's car could not haul all of the Pole Corral men, and there were but three horses in the cañon. This last hope vanished as quickly as it arose. Karg threw up a hand, motioned behind him. Around the bend in the cañon immediately back of the roadster a second automobile loomed in sight, bounding forward on the trail as though awaiting the signal. It was Bravo Jim's newly purchased big touring model.

J. Rufus Renshaw, who had piloted the car for its owner through the night, was not in it. Instead, two big-hatted Double Diamond punchers were in possession. Immediately behind the Spellman roadster the Pole Corral car halted.

"Go up and take their artillery, Rawlins," directed the gunman realtor. The biggest of the pair hopped out and strode toward the three who were still in possession of their weapons. There was no choice but to permit the disarming, if Bravo Jim was to spare the lives of his men.

That accomplished, Dan Spellman took personal charge of the proceedings. He rearranged the order of the machines and their passengers, crowding four Pole Corral men

into the rear seat of the touring car, taking his position beside the Double Diamond driver and turning full around with revolver in hand. Dallas Tucker stood on the running board, also with drawn gun. Hillis and Brand rode with Karg and the two machine gun operators in the blue roadster.

"Might relieve the congestion here a bit," suggested Bravo Jim, pleasantly, "by using our horses." He motioned up the cañon. Three animals browsed with heads down, nibbling at rare bunch grass along the wall of the gorge. He would have preferred the saddle, for in the crowded condition in which the prisoners were packed the flesh wound he had received under the arm the night before pained him considerably.

"The horses will keep," declared the Double Diamond boss. "They won't stray far with reins trailing, and we've got to *travel*." He shot out a brusque warning: "The first hombre that tries to pull anything will be drilled."

The two cars backed a distance in the narrow gorge, turned, and started out toward the foothills and Moon Mesa.

The sun had just come up. As the cañon was left behind, Bravo Jim saw that Karg, in

the roadster, was leading the way toward Badger Buttes, where the foothills touched the rim of Moon Mesa. To the north of the buttes, barely discernible around the edges of the highest of the cone-like eminences, was an object that looked suspiciously like an overturned motor truck.

A few minutes later Bravo Jim was certain the object was a wrecked machine, and some distance below it there was a second truck. Four men were standing beside it, and they seemed to be awaiting the arrival of Karg and Spellman.

The machines continued on, straight for the waiting party. Presently Bravo saw that one of the waiting quartet wore smoked glasses and moved about with a slight limp—Colonel Lazure, government officer.

It was evident that the rapid-fire gun heard before daylight had been discharged at this point; also it was clear now how Karg had been able to switch cars. The roadster, with the machine gun, manned by Double Diamond punchers, had been in battle here. Later Karg had driven to this spot with J. Rufus in the touring car, then had changed to the roadster, leaving the two Double Diamond punchers to come up the cañon later in Bravo Jim's ma-

chine. As for J. Rufus, he was now one of the quartet standing below the butte, a prisoner.

The reason for the presence here of Colonel Lazure was but partially apparent. There had been some sort of an engagement, presumably with smugglers, during which the contraband truck had jumped a bend in the road and overturned. Bravo Jim was convinced that Dan Spellman and Karg were operating with the smugglers, as Miss Fay had suspected. Then why this battle? Standing back from the butte some distance, was the second truck, and it was the same big machine that Baldy Carr had been watching at Tank hill the night before. It was now piled high with some sort of contraband, concealed from sight by a weather-browened tarpaulin. Plainly this load had been transferred from the wrecked machine after the fight.

At this moment the cowman was near enough to the big truck to observe under the edge of the tarpaulin the booted legs of two men. Heavy ropes were wrapped and tied about the boots, indicating that the prisoners were very much alive in spite of the machine gun assault of which they had been the victims.

Now Karg, in the lead, jumped from the roadster. Spellman left the touring car, and

the pair walked briskly up toward the Colonel and his three cowpuncher companions.

"Well, Colonel, we landed 'em!" declared the Old Man, in a loud voice that was deliberately pitched to carry to Bravo Jim. "Anton here did mighty good work."

He turned to one of the Texans, "Dick, glad you and Shorty didn't give up the raid on this smuggling party just because these Pole Corral hombres got the drop on us at the party and toted us away! Good work. Pretty fair haul you made, eh, Colonel?" He squinted toward the well-filled truck.

Lazure's reply was inaudible to Bravo Jim. Dan Spellman's florid face held an expansive grin. "I reckon you know now, Colonel, why these hombres pulled that kidnapping last night?"

Lazure nodded, murmured something about Anton having enlightened him. Dan Spellman evidently wanted Bravo Jim to hear the "reason" for the "kidnapping" also, for he explained, still in loud tones:

"Bravo Calhoun, knowing this cargo was going through, figured he'd make it a sure job for the smugglers by grabbing us. Soon as he busted into the patio with his gunplay last night, I knew his game. Somebody told

him about you and me being government men, Colonel!

"Somebody tipped him off that we were going to stage this raid tonight and seize the contraband," continued Spellman. "So he got busy. He figured it would be easier to grab us at the rancho than to buck our machine gun when we slung into action up here where the contraband was going through!" Dan Spellman laughed heartily.

"Well, he almost succeeded. Anton told you, I reckon, how they had us in the cañon? We got our heads together, and pulled this trick, and you see we've got 'em. I don't reckon Bravo will be able to help his amigos push through any more of the stuff for awhile, Colonel!"

Lazure again nodded approval.

The Old Man gestured to the bound pair in the truck. "Anton says you bagged Horse Cabral and Injun Meadows? Lucky you didn't have to fill 'em full of lead—they'll be able to turn state's evidence against this Pole Corral crowd. Well, it was a good night's work, Colonel. Cabral and Meadows are two of the most notorious contraband runners on the border. A few more hauls like this, and Uncle Sam will break up the game, Colonel."

Lazure limped over in the direction of the two automobiles, his goggled eyes on the Pole Corral prisoners. "You're taking these chaps in to stand trial, Dan?" he queried of Spellman. "Better carry this tenderfoot along, too—he's one of your prisoners. We'll take in Cabral and Meadows with the truckload—they're the only two the records will show to my credit." An amused smile was on the officer's lips.

"Yeah, we'll take Renshaw," Spellman agreed, with alacrity. "Not that they'll be any quarrel as to which one gets the credit, Colonel! Being new on Uncle Sam's payroll, though, it won't hurt for me to make a record. Not that I'm dependent on the salary, exactly, but I aim to give the government the best I know how."

The border capitalist, revealed at last by these words as some sort of an officer beyond doubt, was in a hurry to move, as shown by the impatient prodding of J. Rufus toward the car. "I'll leave Jake and Dal to give you a lift, if needed, Colonel." He sent the two Double Diamond men back to the officer. Lumbering into the touring car, he gestured impatiently to Karg to get under way with the lead machine.

Sensing that Spellman's hurry was partly

meant to keep him from answering the charges here, Bravo Jim spoke to the Colonel pointedly:

"If you're an honest officer, Lazure—and I'm dead sure Dan Spellman is a crooked one—you'll be interested to know this raid was staged for your benefit. Spellman lies when he says the Pole Corral is mixed up in smuggling."

The Colonel shrugged. "You'll have an opportunity to tell your story in court, Calhoun."

"I doubt it."

"Why?" asked Lazure, quietly.

"Spellman doesn't count on taking us where we can tell our story to a jury, because he knows we'd prove that he and Karg are the brains of this smuggling ring."

The statement had been a close hazard on the part of Bravo Jim. It did not seem to impress the government man. Karg, impatient at the exchange between Bravo Jim and Lazure, shoved in the clutch and the roadster bounded forward. The second car followed swiftly.

Over the first rise beyond the buttes, when the caravan was out of sight of the Colonel and his companions, Spellman called a halt. He left the touring car and conversed with Karg a few minutes.

Both men then returned to the rear machine

and, after hand-tying the Pole Corral prisoners, proceeded to blindfold them.

"Doesn't look like we're headed for jail, after all," commented the young cowman, cheerfully. "This won't be the first time you've slipped one over on the Colonel. Why the blinders?"

"Never you mind about the Colonel, Calhoun," retorted Spellman, sullenly. "Fact is, you won't have any worrying to do at all where you're headed for. The blinders? I'll tell you. So you won't feel so blamed bad when you see where you're going!"

CHAPTER XIX

The Cave in the Cañon

A BRIEF half hour later Bravo Jim felt himself being prodded up the side of a cliff, clinging step by step to a narrow rope ladder. He was still blindfolded, though his hands had been freed to enable him to climb. Big Olquin was his immediate guardian now, and Bravo did not know what had happened to Ira, Baldy and Rufus, nor even to the others of his captors. He judged from the sounds about him since the arrival of the cars near this spot that his three loyal employes had already been taken to some place of hiding. The fact that the blindfold had not been removed even here told the ranchman that Karg and Spellman were taking precautions to keep the location of this spot secret.

He had gone seventy-five or eighty feet, as nearly as he could judge, at an angle near the perpendicular. Olquin was on the rope support immediately behind him. "Yo're near the top, hombre," grunted the half-breed, finally.

"Step right in soon's you hit solid ground."

The blind ascent was far from a pleasant sensation without the faculty of vision, for the rope ladder led to an astonishing height. But now Bravo Jim heard a voice above him that he recognized as that of Dan Spellman: "Swing yourself in, Calhoun!"

Reaching a level recess in the cliff, the prisoner obeyed. As he stepped forward the Double Diamond boss unknotted the blindfold.

Bravo Jim found himself at the opening of a cave. The aperture was a small one, but as his eyes became accustomed to the light he saw that it led back to a large chamber underground. It was the exterior that interested him most, however, for he sought to get his bearings. He knew he could not have been taken far from Puerco cañon and the scene of the wrecked truck. Yet, looking across to a blank wall of porphyry and slate, Bravo Jim saw that the cliff "window" gave no clew as to its location.

The cave was in some narrow pass or cañon, whose high, close-set walls shut out all other view. Downward stretched a rope ladder fifty feet, then it dropped under a jutting ledge of rock for a stretch of thirty or forty feet more to the ground.

Big Olquin now proceeded to jerk on the

ladder, at the same time untying the top strands from a huge spike in the hard shale overhead, while Dan Spellman, gun in hand, commanded Bravo Jim to remain standing at the entrance and look down.

The rope ladder dropped, and Bravo Jim saw it strike an automobile top far below.

The breed chuckled. "Anton shore done a good job. Beats any padlock in any jail on the Rio!" He turned to Spellman. "Take him back a ways, Dan, till I work this combynation to get the ladder up agin! That's somethin' we don't want this hombre to see!"

The Double Diamond boss jerked up his six-shooter barrel, commanded Bravo Jim to move back in the passage. A faint light glimmered far in the cavern. When around the turn in the passage the Old Man halted.

"This'll be your home for a spell, Calhoun, like you told us about Puerco cañon! All set, Olie?" he called out to the breed.

For answer Big Olquin strode into the passage. From his hand dangled a bunch of slender ropes.

"Sit down, Calhoun," snapped Spellman, and in another minute Olquin had tied the cowman hand and foot with stout thongs of rawhide.

"Why use the hogging strings on me?" queried Bravo, with a grin. "You don't reckon I could jump down that eighty feet from the cave, with the ladder gone, do you?"

"Yuh might fly out," chuckled Olquin. "Buzzards kin do tricks thataway."

"You and the Old Man know it from experience, I reckon." Bravo had his own idea of why he was being tied. His captors did not want him to have the run of the cave.

"Sorry we'll have to leave you now, Bravo kid," announced Dan Spellman, cheerfully. "Think things over while we're gone, and maybe when we get back you'll be ready to talk turkey." With that he turned to Olquin, and the pair disappeared around the passage toward the hole in the cliff wall. After a time all grew silent.

Bravo Jim worked his arms and fingers in vain to free the rawhide. His position was cramped, painful, and he found it more so as he struggled. After a time he rested as much as his unnatural position would permit. His knees were drawn up close to his face and his hands were tied in front of his ankles.

Presently he rolled over and over and got far enough around the passage to see that Olquin and Spellman had left the cave. The

rope ladder was gone from its place over the big iron spike.

Again the cowman rolled farther into the passage. The ordeal sapped his strength and wrenched the flesh wound under his left arm. He rested. The dim light still burned somewhere back in the cavern. After a time Bravo Jim heard a low murmur of voices.

He rolled again, worked himself at intervals deeper into the cave. It took him an hour to reach a wall of upright piñon poles and earth, through a crack of which flickered a lantern's light. Working up close to the narrow aperture, he managed to peer through.

He was astonished at what he saw—a room fully twenty feet wide, fifty feet deep, and of uncertain height. The walls were rock and red clay, and the ancient timbering and crude masonry at the corners told that the cavern was once an Indian cliff house. Bits of pottery lay scattered and broken about the floor. But even these things did not interest Bravo Jim so much as the presence of a pair of long benches and a pine table in the room. Soon he heard a voice. He gave answer, for he recognized the speaker as his own foreman.

"Hello, Baldy, who's there with you?" he called, as cheerily as conditions would permit.

"It's us, Bravo—Ira and Rufus and me and nobody else. Tied up—hawg-tied, and them devils didn't leave a drap of water or a bite to eat. They took Bill and Felipe and Joe somewheres else. You free, Bravo?"

"Not yet." The cowman twisted his wrists and fingers until the muscles stood out in knots, but the rawhide held, cutting more deeply into the flesh.

"This is shore one smugglers' nest," affirmed Ira, amidst his groans as he struggled with his bonds. "There's another room back uh this, and I c'n see where some kind uh heavy boxes was scraped along the floor through here."

The day dragged painfully. Wednesday evening came, with no one to relieve their thirst or to bring food. Night shut out the faint daylight of the passage from the entry hole, and still Bravo Jim and his friends remained bound, unable to work loose the rawhide. The cowman fell into a fitful sleep, lying on his side until his cramped position woke him and forced him to roll over on the other side. Finally he drowsed in sitting posture, and when he awoke a yellow sunbeam was slanting down the passage from the hole of the cave. It was Thursday morning.

His head throbbed for water, and his stomach gnawed for food. His own plight did not concern him so much as that of his fellows in the adjoining compartment. After two hours there were sounds at the entrance. The cowman rolled back a distance. A stocky figure was stepping from the rope ladder. Behind Dan Spellman came two others, in turn.

They glided into the passage with guns drawn, ready for action if the prisoners had succeeded in loosening the rawhide. Dan Spellman halted before the bound owner of the Pole Corral.

"What's the verdict, Calhoun?" he wanted to know. "Ready to leave the Rio Grande? Price has gone down. We offer twenty-five thousand."

"Figure isn't high enough," declared Bravo Jim, genially, suppressing the pain of his bonds and the dry torture of his parched throat.

"No?" Spellman's countenance lit up. "How much you asking, Bravo?"

"One million, nine hundred thousand, not counting livestock."

The Double Diamond boss exchanged glances with Olquin and his gunman, Karg.

"Bring him a drink, Olie," he said, mean-

ingly. Olquin strode back toward the entrance, returned with a canteen. Dan Spellman uncorked it, let some of the cold water gurgle out and onto the rocky floor of the cave. He raised it to the thirsty man's mouth, and as Bravo Jim's lips opened, he quickly withdrew it.

"That's just a sample of a couple weeks ahead of you, Calhoun," he said, with a laugh. "Only you'll need it ten times worse before a week is out. Your friends," motioning toward the inner room, "will take the same medicine. Ready to talk business?"

"You'll pay for these things, Spellman," declared the young cowman, grimly.

"Now, to show I'm the right sort, Calhoun, I'll tell you something. First, Anton Karg had it all fixed to drill you on sight, and I talked him out of it, temporarily. I've got you for a couple weeks. It happens you own something I can use mighty bad, Bravo Jim, in this Pole Corral property. We figured instead of making you eat lead right off, or dropping you from that ladder into the cañon, we'd treat you to a little taste of purgatory—you and your men both. You're sure in for it, Bravo Jim!"

This declaration, it seemed to the prisoner, was a preposterous one from a man who had amassed considerable wealth through his busi-

ness deals, dubious as many of those transactions might have been. A deed signed by coercion would not be worth the paper it was written on, provided the conveyor survived to contest it in the courts. Corrupt courts were not uncommon, of course, where self-seeking politicians held sway, but the hazard of bribery would be too great to justify this reckless move. There was but one plausible conclusion—Spellman intended, if such a deed were signed, to make a safe job of it by putting the seller out of the way before he could raise a point of legality.

It was a large order that the border capitalist was undertaking in thus holding in addition to his intended victim the other Pole Corral employes. Each of them would be a prospective witness. Karg and the Old Man possibly had plans for eliminating danger from these others, also. The whole proceeding bespoke desperation and passionate determination to get hold of the rancho, and Bravo Jim could not even now understand what big motive impelled these men. If the property were desired as a smuggling base, the cowman could not “see” the big money in it. Bravo Jim met Spellman’s gaze evenly.

“Thanks. But why did you pull all that

stall down there before the Colonel, Spellman? About me being mixed up in this smuggling ring you've been operating? Seems that's all unnecessary now."

"I'll tell you," laughed the florid-faced one. "I figured I'd fix it so you'd land in jail pronto, in case there was a slip-up. So you might as well eat snake—you're as good as convicted even if you escape. Also there won't be any stink raised by the Colonel or anybody if you happen to get shot. But that's neither here nor there. You're going to turn into a mummy in this cave, Calhoun, if you don't listen to reason, and that's no padre's nightmare."

"Goodbye, gentlemen," Bravo Jim's blanched features held a smile. "I don't reckon you're handing over any water, but I'd like a cigarette."

"Sure," Dan Spellman obligingly produced a "tailor made" and thrust it between the cowman's lips. He scanned the floor of the cave. "Looks like you've been rolling around some. Olie, I reckon we'd better peg him to the wall."

Olquin produced a stout rope from the entrance and laced the prisoner against a jutting rock from the cavern side.

"Set down the canteen," grunted Karg, joining in the conversation for the first time.

"It will keep him company. Let the cork out so he can see the water glisten."

"That's a idee!" laughed the breed. He set the vessel within two feet of the bound man. Now the three strode off and flung back the door into the adjoining room of the cave.

"Hello," Bravo Jim heard Spellman say. "How's the boys?" Bravo Jim's teeth gritted at the torturous denial of food and drink to his employes, designed to break the morale of the ranchman. He decided he could not permit this to go on much longer. Dan Spellman held a fat hand in this game; Bravo would give the deed to the rancho rather than see Ira, Baldy and J. Rufus die of thirst. The case of the last named particularly worried the cowman.

J. Rufus had been game throughout; he had lain bound against the rock wall all day and night, without a whimper. Miss Fay had reason to be proud of this man. Although he had come here broken in health, he had already shown "sand" surpassing the best.

"How's the N'Yawk lad?" demanded Olquin after a time. From somewhere back in the cave Karg brought another big canteen, and Bravo Jim heard the three renegades go through with their program of torture.

"He don't want water," laughed Olquin, finally. "This is the gent that come out here to get away from lickin'! By Jerry, Dan, hand me that whisky!"

Bravo Jim could not see what was going on, but he knew that Karg and Olquin were tempting the tenderfoot to taste of the liquor. J. Rufus had not uttered a sound, but now he spoke in harsh tones: "Take it away, boys; it isn't any use."

Whether the whisky-craving had already been burned from his blood by the gruelling work of the ranch, or whether he was fighting now against a craving that was torturous, J. Rufus Renshaw held to his decision. Olquin, with an oath, passed the bottle around among his companions.

Meanwhile, Bravo Jim was not idle. With the glowing cigarette between his lips he bent his head down as far as possible, and held the burning fag against his rawhide thongs. He puffed the cigarette until it glowed, applied it again and again. Finally the tobacco embers died. Scarcely a scar had been made on the green rawhide.

Presently Dan Spellman and Karg came through the passage and went down the rope ladder, leaving Olquin with the prisoners.

CHAPTER XX

The Diary of a Girl

THE piñon pole door between the passage and the main room of the old cliff-house cavern had been left open, revealing the trussed-up, thirst-plagued prisoners writhing on the earthen floor. The sight sickened Bravo Jim, who forgot his own torment in the spectacle of the other sufferers, whose only crime was their loyalty to the cause of the Pole Corral. Particularly the courage and fortitude of the young tenderfoot cowboy affected Bravo Jim.

Big Olquin strode past the cowman. "Nobody won't ask yuh to come acrost again, Calhoun," he grunted. "You'll do the askin' next time, hombre." He stamped through the passage and into the big room, halting before J. Rufus.

"Want a drink?" he queried, with a husky laugh.

No answer.

"Water?"

The tenderfoot disdained reply.

“Whisky?”

Still no answer. Big Olquin stooped before the prostrate figure, placed a flask at the sufferer's lips. In the lantern glow Bravo Jim saw the tenderfoot's tightly-locked mouth. The breed chuckled, pulled the bottle back and uncorked it. He wet his fingers with the stuff, smeared it over the man's lips.

“Want some?”

An expression of terrible distortion swept across the young Easterner's countenance. His head rose, and his eyes were on the renegade. But his lips did not move.

With a shrug Olquin lifted the lantern from the table and strode farther back into the cavern, into another passage that, from the moving lantern's light, appeared to be connected with a chamber farther back. Old cliff dwellings of this sort usually were made up of numerous rooms, Bravo Jim knew, though he had never seen one so far underground. Olquin was moving something about in the inner chamber. The cowman spoke to his employees:

“If you can hold out a little longer, boys, there's a chance. But say the word if you can't stand it—and I'll quit.” The fear that J. Rufus would again fall slave to the curse that had brought disgrace upon him, and had

caused Miss Fay misery, prompted the decision.

"We'll stick, Bravo," murmured Baldy, and the others seconded the decision. "With you, to a man, Bravo Jim," came from the stern, pale lips of the tenderfoot.

Olquin lumbered back. He leered into the face of the cowman. "Want a drink?" He took up the canteen, shook the water in it, set it down in front of his victim. "How about some grub? Might as well have it now as two weeks from now—when yo're dead," he grunted.

"Sure, bring it in," laughed the prisoner.

"Th' hades I will!"

"I'll take a cigarette, Olquin," returned Bravo Jim, smiling.

The renegade chuckled. "Shore, Mike!" He believed smoking would intensify the victim's thirst, the cowman knew. Manufacturing a brown-paper smoke, the Double Diamond foreman thrust it between Bravo Jim's lips.

When he turned away, the prisoner bent his face to the rawhide, applied the burning tobacco, puffed it into renewed fire, applied it again. He repeated the operation until the cigarette was ashes. But the rawhide showed little effect of the burn.

"I'll take another one, Olquin," said Bravo

Jim, when the breed came by again. With a grunt Olquin made him one. The operation was repeated. Suddenly the cavern guard whirled about.

"So that's yore game!" he snarled. "Tryin' to burn them thongs!" He stooped, thrust his head forward, examining the prisoner's bonds. A hoarse chuckle escaped him. "Hell, yuh couldn't burn off that green rawhide in a week thataway! But yo're shore a tricky devil, an' will bear watchin'!"

"Better watch closely, Olquin. Because I'm sure going to need it," affirmed Bravo Jim, grimly.

The breed tapped the butt of his protruding forty-five. "The first false move, hombre, an' yo're shore a corpse." He went about his tasks, which, strangely, had to do with more than the prisoners. There was something in the back room of the cavern that was engaging his attention. Every now and then a heavy object thudded to the earthen floor, as though Olquin were piling up or pulling down stacks of goods. Bravo Jim wondered if it was contraband.

If so, he marveled that it should have been possible to bring it to this almost inaccessible place. The cave, he knew, was but a tiny hole like a robber-bee's nest in the immensity of the

cliff surface. From the ground it probably would not be noticed. What prehistoric people had utilized this spot must have chosen their domicile deliberately to avoid destruction from the marauding warriors of other tribes.

The day advanced; hunger and thirst and the torment of cramped limbs and constricted, rawhide-bound muscles played their role against the prisoners' wills. Big Olquin continued his taunting offers of water, only to pull back the fluid when smarting eyes feasted upon it. Again and again the persecutor toyed with the whisky bottle at the lips of J. Rufus Renshaw. "Honest, Rufie, darlin', I ain't teasin' yuh," insisted Olquin. "I won't take it away from yuh when yuh start to drink. She's yores for the askin'. Reason I'm offerin' it is because that hombre Calhoun has made a deal with a certain party to keep yuh away from old Demon Rum. Drink yoreself plumb to the neck, hombre, an' welcome!"

But Rufus did not drink.

Bravo Jim looked at the uncorked canteen in front of him, placed there for torture purposes at the suggestion of Karg. His drawn features brightened almost imperceptibly. "Olquin," he said, huskily, "take that canteen away. I can't stand it."

"Nada," grinned the cavern guard. "That's why she's there."

"Take it away, I tell you!"

"Nix."

"Then put back the cork, so I can't see the water!"

"Watch me."

"Then pour it out, so I can see it all! Set it in one of those Indian bowls in front of me. It'll drive me mad, but that will be better than this!"

Olquin chuckled deeply. "Shore!" Picking up a bit of the ancient pottery, he drained the canteen, then set the vessel down where it would add to the cowman's misery. But Bravo Jim's eyes glowed with a strange light.

Before midday the rope ladder was put into use again. Anton Karg arrived, asked Olquin if Bravo Jim had "broken" yet. The guard was forced to make an adverse report. The gunman left.

Middle afternoon brought an unexpected development. Karg climbed the rope ladder with a visitor, a girl. "There he is," said the gambler, blandly, and pointed out the bound ranchman. "He isn't bad hurt."

Miss Fay halted in fear and horror at the sight. Evidently Karg had lured her here with

a tale that Bravo Jim or Rufus was in trouble and needed attention. As she darted forward to undo the cowman's bonds, Karg seized her. "Come here first, Miss. See who's waiting for you!" He guided her quickly past the ranchman to the prostrate form of the young tenderfoot whom she had secretly followed to the West.

The girl screamed. Bravo Jim's teeth gritted at Karg's act in thus leading her to the spot where J. Rufus suffered. There was a tense, heart-rending moment when Miss Fay flung herself upon the bound man and the prisoner raised his tortured face to her lips—a moment more cruel when Karg jerked her roughly back upon the floor of the cave, and proceeded to tie her up like the men.

In a few minutes he had finished the task; then he dragged the girl across the passage where she faced Bravo Jim. He turned to the Pole Corral cowman:

"Now you can watch her suffer, too, Calhoun. I reckon that'll bring you to time if nothing else will. You and that tenderfoot both being in love with her."

The cowman's eyes flamed in lambent rage. But he quickly choked back the high feeling that swayed his being, and laughed bitterly, mockingly.

"This lady is nothing to me, Karg. You're wrong if you think that will change me."

He had said this to spare the girl, hoping that it would dissuade the renegade from his purpose to use her as a victim.

"Never mind, hombre. *I know.*"

"You lie, Karg."

"Do I?" The gambler-gunman slowly drew from his pocket a tiny brown leather book. "It's the lady's diary. In her own handwriting." He read aloud:

"Thursday: At the real estate office I met him. Both of us realized the truth at this first meeting. He is noble, grand, magnificent. Only to myself I confessed; I did not let him know. He asked me to be his wife—then, before we had known each other ten minutes. Now I know there is such a thing as love at first sight——"

"Karg, you will die for this," broke in the cowman, in tones freighted with conviction.

"Listen, Bravo Jim," chuckled the realtor-renegade. "Here's another passage:

"My Secret: He apologized for his proposal, as though he had hurt me by thus honoring me. Poor Rufus, and yet fortunate Rufus! Bravo Jim will make a man of him, if only because I asked it——"

"You are a viper, Karg," cut in the bound

man. "Is there nothing sacred to you on this earth?"

The gambler leaped to his feet, reaching for his gun, as a shadow crossed the front of the cave. The husky voice of Dan Spellman broke the silence:

"How dare you bring my niece to this hole, Karg? I've got you covered. Now untie Miss Fay, pronto!"

There was something about the tone of voice that did not ring true. The Old Man was playing a game, Bravo Jim believed, making a bluff at a rescue, thus placing the blame for this episode solely upon the broad shoulders of Karg, while he gained the girl's confidence.

The proof of this was furnished a moment later, when Karg leaped toward the Double Diamond boss, and bore him to the floor of the cave. There was a scuffle, obviously staged, during which Spellman apparently was thoroughly subdued.

"Lend a hand, Olie! Out he goes!" Anton Karg yanked the border capitalist through the passage, and the light at the cave entrance showed Spellman being hustled down the rope ladder in the gunman's custody.

Bravo Jim met the frightened eyes of the girl. If the reading of the diary had embar-

rassed her, she did not show it now in the excitement of this tense situation. Bravo thought he understood. Her feeling for him could be but a young girl's passing whim, for Rufus was the one for whom she had come to the Rio Grande, and just a few minutes before, the cowman had witnessed the kiss she had given the imprisoned Easterner.

All had become silent again in the cave. Big Olquin had gone down the ladder, too, bent on some mission with Karg and the Old Man. In this he would be safe, for men tied up for hours, until their strength weakened and their bound limbs had become numb, would not be likely to free themselves now. Even so, the ladder was guarded, if not tossed away from the cave altogether.

"Miss Fay, can you reach that bit of pottery with your foot?" asked the cowman, turning his eyes on the vessel of water just out of his reach. "Push it this way just a few inches. Thanks very much."

Bravo Jim strained to force his bound hands down into the bowl. Big Olquin appeared in the entrance again, and walked down the passage. With a laugh he went by, and into the bigger room. Suddenly he halted, stared at one of the prisoners.

Weakened by loss of sleep, hard work and the unusual tax on his physique, J. Rufus Renshaw had fallen senseless in his rawhide bonds. With a quick movement, Big Olquin bent over him with a bottle in hand, forced the container between the tenderfoot's lips, and let the amber fluid trickle down his throat.

The tenderfoot stirred uneasily, but did not open his eyes. The breed continued to drain the whisky flask down the weak man's throat.

Feverishly Bravo Jim had dipped his wrists into the bowl of water in front of him, and now he rested. Knowing that rawhide will expand liberally when wet, he had counted upon what he accomplished now. His two hands slipped free.

Olquin's personal flask of liquor had already been considerably depleted when he had begun to share it with the tenderfoot cowpuncher, and when the last of it had been drained, he rose and hurried down the passage into the inner room to bring another.

Bravo Jim Calhoun, stiff and numb from the hours of his confinement, moved slowly back and forth to take the rigidity out of his shoulders and back, working his stony hands and fingers as he did so. Gradually he was able to fumble with the knotted rawhide about

his legs and ankles, the fingers finding life and enough motion to untie the thongs.

He stretched out his legs, moved them back and forth, drew them up again as Big Olquin appeared in the passage, now carrying a re-filled flask. The breed stooped again beside the prostrate tenderfoot, lifting the bottle to his lips.

His head was turned away from Bravo Jim. Rising painfully and silently to his feet, the cowman slowly straightened, the effort wrenching his cramped frame until he thought his back would break. He took a step, his knees stiff and sore; then another. He paused, summoning as much of his Herculean strength as hours of unnatural posture would permit, then threw himself toward the torturer.

Big Olquin whirled, dropping the bottle, and reached for his wooden-handled Colt.

CHAPTER XXI

Under the Overhang

BRAVO JIM was at the near end of the underground room when Big Olquin went for his gun. Desperate as were the chances of leaping upon the renegade before he could fire, a hundred to one against the cowman, Bravo Jim did not hesitate. As his feet touched the earthen floor at the end of his second jump, the Pole Corral man clutched at the only object at hand that might be used as a club against the gun, faint as was the likelihood that the weapon would prove effective. It was a chunk of broken Indian pottery, the rim of an olla.

When Bravo Jim's benumbed arm raised to throw the fireclay, Big Olquin's six-shooter barrel leaped to its target.

In the instant before the pottery left his hand, Bravo Jim realized that the bullet would find its mark more quickly than his own inadequate weapon, and the renegade's ball would be many times more deadly both as to aim and

execution. Bravo's arm jerked forward and his hand discharged the broken vessel at the moment his ears smote with the concussion of the heavy gun. The bullet had been the quicker.

But strange to say, Big Olquin's leaden slug did not reach its target, and Bravo Jim had seen a move beneath the renegade that explained the wildly misdirected shot. A pair of cowboy boots, tied together with rawhide, had jack-knifed into a battering ram under the renegade, and J. Rufus Renshaw's desperate stroke to save his employer had counted. The lashed boots struck Big Olquin behind the knees on the instant of firing; the bullet had gone wild to the left, ploughing harmlessly into the shale of the cavern wall.

Almost at the same moment, the chunk of pottery struck the forearm of the renegade. As the big revolver wavered and hung unused in the stunned hand, two powerful bodies of hard muscle and bone built by years of rough work on the cattle range, came together with a dull crash that sounded through the smoky cave.

There were cries of exultation and encouragement in the stifling air of the underground, a cheer from a woman's throat, but Bravo Jim scarcely heard them. Big Olquin was a giant

in stature and agile as a panther. He strove to reach the younger man's throat as the two contenders rolled over and over and locked in a test of main bull strength.

Bravo Jim, lanky, ordinarily supple, range-hardened as his adversary, knew he was at a disadvantage, due to the bodily stiffness from the long confinement. He played for time. Guarding himself from every straining motion of Olquin to put him on his back, the Pole Corral man fought a defensive battle for long minutes. If he had sought a method of restoring both circulation and muscle play he could not have done better than to enter such a contest. Yet Bravo still took his time, content to hold his foe in check while he loosened up and gathered his superb physical being under control. Olquin grunted, pressed, twisted and swore, and his offensive tactics slowly winded him.

Suddenly by a quick turn the younger man thrust his right leg under his opponent's middle and brought forward the left for a body scissors, grasping the breed's left wrist and heaving the arm upward as he did so. It was a hold he had tried often in sport with Bill Brand, prize wrestler of the rancho.

J. Rufus Renshaw let out a cheer for Bravo

that held a note of wild hilarity in it. If the whisky that Olquin had forced down his throat was having any effect at all, it was serving only to make J. Rufus a more defiant prisoner.

Meanwhile, Bravo Jim had pried the renegade's big frame over on its side and heaved him two-thirds under.

A pair of tiger teeth settled into the ranchman's nearest shoulder. Big Olquin was biting like a bulldog. Renshaw was yelling for vengeance, a flood of reckless denunciation streaming from the lips of the enraged tenderfoot. There was a brief moment of fearful straining between the two figures on the floor of the cave. Olquin was biting to the bone.

With deliberate movement Bravo Jim's right hand released its grip on the other's wrist. The scissors hold was forgotten, and in its place the young cowman delivered a stroke as from a sledge. The blow reached the renegade at the temple; his biting teeth opened, his mouth sagged and his eyes rolled. He collapsed.

In a jiffy Bravo Jim tied him up, kicking his gun aside. He seized the victim's skinning knife, slashed the rawhide thongs that bound the girl, then in turn cut loose the lashes from the legs and wrists of Renshaw, Baldy and Ira. He had not even paused until now

to take up Olquin's six-shooter, but at this juncture he appropriated both the renegade's forty-five and the heavily-loaded cartridge belt.

"Rufus, your kick saved me from being drilled," declared Bravo Jim, still winded from the struggle. "And if it wasn't for Miss Fay——"

"Look!" gasped the girl, throwing a hand up toward the hole of daylight at the end of the passage. The roar of a revolver punctuated the warning, and Bravo Jim's gun snarled in reply as a leaden slug splintered a piñon pole of the inside barrier. At the outer opening a man's hands flung outward and up.

But the new arrival at the cliff aperture did not topple. Instead he sprang high in air, and up over the circle of daylight to the ledge above the cave. Bravo Jim, amazed, ran for the entrance.

The rope ladder had vanished, dropped into the gorge. Cautiously the ranchman leaned out far enough to look above him whence the unknown renegade had disappeared a few moments before. There was no clew as to how the puncher had managed to go up into space, in a single leap that had carried him high over the cave opening.

Far above jutted a ledge of rock, fully forty

feet from the cliff dwelling. This overhang extended fifteen feet or more outward to the center of the gorge. How a human being could have got up through the intervening space was more than the cowman could guess.

He looked below him, and saw the radiator and hood of the blue roadster, barely visible around the rock and earth wall of the precipice. On the floor of the cañon lay the end of the rope ladder. Suddenly Bravo Jim sighted a face—Karg's—peering up from a ledge of slate rock at the bottom of the gorge. So far as he could see the gambler did not have a weapon in hand; he was merely watching the entrance to the cave, evidently satisfied that the prisoners were entrapped there for good.

Bravo Jim might have slain the gunman then and there, but his code of honor stayed his hand since Karg was not trying to use his own weapon. Instead, the Pole Corral cowman took deliberate aim to rain a hail of rock and dirt about the gambler's head. Karg dropped from sight as though the bullet had been driven into his countenance instead of to one side. Bravo Jim suppressed a laugh.

Behind him in the cave, Baldy, Ira and Rufus had got the stiffness out of their limbs enough to come forward, wanting to know what

they could do to lend a hand. The girl of the chestnut hair stood beside the tenderfoot cowboy, conversing in low earnest tones.

"Looks like we was done, 'spite of you turn-in' the tables on that half-breed hombre," said Ira, dolefully, his pudgy countenance a sickly yellow. "I reckon they'll starve us out—gosh, I'd give a month's wages for a drink uh water an' a bite to eat. That air bowl with the water in it was upset in that rasslin' match. Now what?"

Bravo Jim was not idle. Having forced the cadaverous face of Karg to withdraw under the ledge of rock below, the cowman grasped the spike that had held the ladder, and leaned far out. He looked above him. Sudden surprise gripped him at what he saw there and he swung back hastily into the hole in the cliff.

Dan Spellman's florid features had been plainly discernible on the overhanging ledge high above the cave, at the very edge of the rocky projection. And creeping down from the overhang, Bravo Jim had seen a long rope, secured at the top of the precipice by a block-and-tackle arrangement connected with a lone scrub juniper.

Bravo Jim smiled grimly. Some such arrangement explained the sudden disappearance

of the puncher who had fired the shot a few minutes before, then bolted upward. Also it was evident that this block-and-tackle contraption had been in use before—it could not have been rigged up for this occasion. In fact, the nearest means of entering and leaving the cave was by the upper instead of the lower route, if a rope stairway had been swung from the ledge overhead.

The object that crept down now was not a ladder, but a single stout hempen cable twice the diameter of the usual saddle reata. At its end was attached something white, weighted down with a rock as large as a cocoanut.

When the rope had reached a point opposite the cave, the line began to sway back and forth like a pendulum—an action promoted by Dan Spellman himself, as Bravo Jim now observed. The weighted end of the rope swung to the hole in the cliff, and Bravo Jim seized it. He unwrapped a folded bit of paper, and read the penciled words:

Dear Niece: I've learned of Karg's perfidy and have come to save all of you. We've driven the smugglers from the top of the gorge. I will put down a rope ladder from here for all of you to climb up, one at a time. You must come first, before Karg discovers what we are doing and starts shooting from below.

Your Uncle.

Bravo Jim laughed as he handed the paper over to Miss Fay. There was treachery in this, he knew well. The Old Man had an ulterior reason for posing as rescuer before the Eastern girl. Yet Bravo hesitated now about exposing Dan Spellman's duplicity, for fear the girl would not take advantage of this one chance of saving her life. She at least would be allowed to come out, the cowman believed.

That Spellman and Karg together had planned this ruse, there was no doubt, and it was equally certain that, once the girl had left the cave, the fate of the remaining party, all Pole Corral men, would be sealed. Either Spellman would hurry Miss Fay from the scene and refuse to lower the rope ladder for the others, or he would permit them to get part way up the cliff and then destroy them—shoot them off the rope, or cut the ladder from its anchoring place above.

J. Rufus Renshaw, having read the note, walked aside with Bravo Jim and discussed the offer of rescue in all of its phases.

"She isn't his niece," said the tenderfoot, his pale features drawn and deeply lined, his eyes bloodshot. "There is something about this that I do not understand—and I am afraid for her. But she will die here."

To this the cowman agreed. While it would be better to let Miss Fay suffer the common fate of the others than to fall prey to possible designs of Spellman, this girl was courageous and self-reliant, and Bravo believed the hazard would be less if she chanced this escape than if she remained here. A terrible fate, under conditions of horror, faced those who were trapped in this cavern of death.

J. Rufus turned away, his features revealing the struggle within. Suddenly the cowman saw him make a movement with an object at his white lips.

Bravo Jim dashed the flask from his hand, and it broke into bits. The tenderfoot sat down with his head in his hands. Olquin had given him the liquor, Bravo Jim knew. Miss Fay went to him, stooped and took his hand. The tenderfoot spoke in husky, fatalistic earnestness. "You'd better leave here, honey. But don't trust Spellman. He is a devil."

The girl refused to listen to starting up the ladder first—not that she feared to try the perilous ascent so much as she suspected all was not well in this proposal. But Bravo Jim, after weighing the matter well, insisted that she make the trial.

Already Dan Spellman was dangling the

rope ladder from the eminence above. He swung it back and forth until Bravo Jim seized it and secured it to the spike over the cave. Then he lifted Miss Fay up to the lower rounds of the rope, and she began to climb.

A girl of less skill and fortitude might have fallen from the dangerous stairway to her death below; but Miss Fay was not only a dancer; she was athletic, a horsewoman, skilled in tennis, swimming and other outdoor sports. She climbed to safety.

The minutes passed, while Bravo Jim and J. Rufus stood together at the cavern's mouth, speaking no word, yet understanding mutually what Ira and Baldy but vaguely suspected. "I'm ready to take my medicine, Bravo Jim," said the tenderfoot, "if we've done the right thing by her."

The two men shook hands on it, realizing that no effort was being made to lower the ladder again.

Then suddenly the weighted single rope dropped from above, swayed over to the cliff opening. Another note was attached, and Bravo Jim read it:

Dear Neighbor Calhoun: Now let's see how we stand. First, no matter what that diary says, Miss Fay will marry me within

twenty-four hours, unless you come through. Price of the rancho is down again — twenty thousand now, and you're lucky to get it. If you don't believe she'll marry me, think this over: If she balks, I'll trade with her, to spare you-all. Further, I'll whisper that she'll marry me or I'll disgrace her publicly for staying at my home as my "niece" — an old bachelor trick! If worse come to worse, I'll decoy her into a trip to Juarez to save her drunken Rufus — and when I get into Mexico there's no woman I can't have for the taking. Now send up your answer.

The Old Man.

Bravo Jim's fingers twitched at the butt of the six-shooter he had taken from the person of Olquin. He would have given all he possessed to face Karg and Spellman both on an equal footing now, but that was out of the question. He would have signed away the Pole Corral, if that would have spared this girl from the threat that Spellman held over her. But he knew that even if he sold the rancho, the Old Man would not keep his bargain unless forced to do so.

Yet nothing could be gained by remaining here. Fate now took a hand in the situation; even had Bravo Jim consented to the conditions laid down there was no pencil or other implement of writing available to reply to the border baron's note. Hence the minutes passed.

Presently the rope ladder suddenly dropped from above and dangled before the cave.

The meaning of this was plain. It was a bait for the ranchman who refused to come to time, a lure that would have destroyed him on the rocky floor of the gorge. If Baldy or Ira or Rufus mounted first, they would have been permitted to reach the top, probably, and there made prisoners. Bravo Jim would thus have been tempted to enter the mid-air trap.

"Don't do it, Bravo," advised Rufus grimly. "You'd be shot off the rope by Karg down below—or they'd cut the ladder loose when you got half way. There isn't one chance in a thousand."

"That one chance is better than none at all." Bravo Jim seized the ladder and began the climb through space. Less than a dozen feet up, the hemp stairway swung clear of the cliff and poised a moment high out from the cañon wall, under the rocky overhang, above the narrow gorge whose floor was a hundred feet below. Dan Spellman's gruff laugh came to the swaying man's ears from overhead.

Suddenly a rifle crackled at the shoulder of Anton Karg in the depths below.

CHAPTER XXII

Rufus Disappears

WHEN the crack of the rifle reverberated from wall to wall in the narrow gorge, Bravo Jim did not fall. For the moment he could not understand how Karg had missed him. As a target, the cowman, suspended in mid-air a hundred feet above the floor of the cañon, swinging clear of both sides of the narrow passage in the late afternoon sun, was an ideal set-up for a rifleman.

Bravo Jim was not unaware of the hazard he had taken. A single glance above had told him that Spellman had returned to the overhanging ledge after getting Miss Fay back some distance where she would not know what was now happening. With an easy movement, the Double Diamond boss could cut or jerk the top of the rope stairway loose, plunging the ranchman to his death on the rocks below.

But the Old Man was not planning this method of destroying his foe, as told by the rifle shot from Karg. As on previous occasions,

the border magnate was leaving the actual commission of murder to his hired killer, the fake real estate man who had turned out to be a professional gunman. Karg was not using the revolver now, but the rifle. The sharp snarl of the weapon sounded again, echoing through the gorge as though it had been several.

Still the swaying cowman did not fall. Both balls had come so near to him that the hiss of lead had sounded in his ears, the last so close that it literally scorched his cheek. Karg was a marksman with the rifle as well as with the six-shooter, and now Bravo Jim knew that he had aimed thus close and no closer deliberately. Karg and Spellman were playing with their victim as a cat would play with a mouse, hoping he would yield and signal willingness to sign over the rancho; or, what was less probable, they were satisfied to let him climb awhile, knowing the higher he went the harder he would fall.

Again the gunman-killer discharged his Winchester, just as the swaying Bravo Jim bounced over against the rock face of the precipice. This time the ball hit the cowman's Stetson at the edge of the broad brim near the forehead. The hat jumped off its owner's head and sailed down through space.

The shot had been a marvelously directed one in view of the fact that the target was swaying back and forth on the long arc of a human pendulum. Bravo Jim had not been inactive; he had in three or four wide swings got the rope ladder into swifter motion. It was not that he hoped thus to thwart the gunman's aim from below; he knew that Karg was too good a shot for that. There was another object in the swaying motion.

Bravo Jim had climbed a dozen feet up the rope ladder, a space more than equal to the height of the south wall of the narrow gorge. Now his boots reached out with great suddenness and clapped against the smooth rock surface of the opposite cliff above the cave. With a tremendous shove, his body rebounded through air toward the far side of the gorge.

The rope ladder, although it had been suspended almost in the center of the gorge, due to the overhang, was not long enough to reach the south wall. But Bravo Jim had climbed up the dozen extra feet for the purpose of getting above the parallel cliff. Now as he hurled through space, he knew the trick would be detected instantly. He held to the rope with his left hand only, and with his right whipped out his six-shooter and fired down the chasm upon

the would-be assassin as Karg's rifle cracked.

He did not know the result of his shot, except that Anton Karg fired wild. Traveling across the cañon, the cowman glanced quickly above him, firing as he did so to stay the hand of Spellman if he should attempt to sever the rope. An instant later Bravo let go of the hemp.

He leaped outward and down, along the pathway of his own momentum. He landed rolling upon the crest of the opposite peak, among the sparse scrub oak, juniper and bare rock. He had holstered his weapon for safety after firing last. Now, halting in his perilous roll on the hill-top, he flung himself upon his knees and whipped out his gun again, facing the overhanging shelf across and above him.

Dan Spellman was not in sight. Having witnessed the sensational escape, on the heels of the bullet that Bravo Jim had sent his way to cover the big leap, the Old Man had made a hasty retreat and had lost no time in hurrying Miss Fay, now his captive, from the scene.

It was very certain the Double Diamond boss had not permitted the girl to observe his attempt to destroy Bravo Jim. Dan Spellman had taken pains throughout to appear innocent of any crime. That fact, combined with the

note dropped on the end of the rope, told Bravo of the magnate's intentions toward her.

The cowman, hatless, bruised, famished for water, crawled along the precipice ridge alert for renewed attack. Pursuit of Spellman was urgent, since Miss Fay was at his mercy. Karg, too, needed attention, not only because he was still somewhere at the bottom of the cañon menacing the remainder of the prisoners on the cliff, but because Bravo Jim had made the resolve that if he came out of the cavern alive he would hunt the man down to take from his profane hands the diary of Miss Fay. Every code of decency had been violated by the gunman in stealing that little booklet and reading its contents to those for whom they were never intended.

Bravo had crawled to the edge of the high wall, where he could command a view of the floor of the gorge. The car had gone. During the period his eyes had searched for Spellman on the rocky ridge above, he had heard a running motor echo faintly in the deep ravine. Now the blue roadster was speeding down to the mesa. Karg doubtless had realized that Bravo Jim's swing across the cañon had given the armed cowman command of the car's position.

The most urgent matter now was the transfer of the other prisoners from the cave to the point reached by Bravo. The rope ladder still sagged down from the overhanging shelf, its ragged end ten or twelve feet beyond reach of the prisoners.

Baldy Carr and his companions had cheered lustily when their leader had made his perilous leap across the chasm via the rope. They had since stood uncertain of their next move. "We cain't reach the rope," called out Ira. "But we c'n stick it out overnight. You look out after yore own self, Bravo, and get off that peak before them snakes scale up from the back end. Then you c'n send help later."

"Knot up those rawhide thongs we cut," shouted Bravo. "If there are too many knots to slip through a honda for a lass-rope, put a weight on and toss to that ladder. It'll hook and you can pull it in. You won't have to swing across, then. Just climb straight up. I've got that overhang covered, and I can see every move in the gorge below—and I've got six chambers filled!"

While Baldy, Ira and Rufus set to work, Bravo Jim searched the ravine bottom for signs of Karg or others in hiding. From his vantage point he got a full sweep of the cañon here,

and two gray limestone rocks looked familiar. From the first Bravo Jim had seen a certain resemblance to his own Puerco cañon in the narrows of this gorge, although he had dismissed the notion, since he knew of no old cliff dwelling ruin of this sort in Puerco.

He began to suspect that from the bottom of the gorge the entrance to the cave was wholly concealed; likewise from the top of the precipice. Later he was to learn that only from the jagged height on which he now stood was the cave mouth visible at all. Bravo only visited Puerco cañon during roundup, if that often.

Now, as he moved up along the peak to examine farther into the upper cul-de-sac for a possible concealed sharp-shooter, he made an astonishing discovery. Grazing far up at the head of the blind gorge, where matted galleta grass marked a tiny spring, were three horses. He saw at a glance that they were his own mounts, the ones he had brought with the Double Diamond prisoners. They had been left behind when Dan Spellman forced him and his companions to travel in the automobiles. This was the same prison cañon in which he had planned to confine the renegade band! Karg and Spellman had driven out of it, only to return to the same spot.

This was land to which he held the deed. How long it could have been used as a rendezvous for thieves and smugglers he did not know. He had no time for speculation on this point now, for Baldy Carr had flung out the patched-up rawhide rope and at last hooked a stone weight over the hemp and pulled it in.

"All clear?" he called. Abruptly Baldy stiffened, raised a hand and gestured excitedly westward. "They're coming up the peak after you, Bravo—down thataway!"

"Good enough!" called back the cowman. "Means they're not hiding out to bag you boys. Soon as you get up to the top, start down the back end for the spring. Horses there waiting. But get going, pronto!"

Not one of the three had guns, the Pole Corral boss knew, but if they escaped up the ladder to the top of their own side of the gorge they would be out of reach of Karg's party.

Baldy and Ira argued about which should go first, each wanting to run the risk of the initial attempt. While they debated, J. Rufus seized the end of the ladder and started hastily upward.

Bravo Jim stood with gun shoved forward, ready for a suspicious move above or below. There was none. The tenderfoot cowboy

reached the top, waved his hand, dropping the ladder for the next in turn.

Bravo Jim stiffened, jugged up his six-shooter, at a sudden movement on the high ledge. A rope darted out, the loop struck and tightened on the tenderfoot, and he was yanked back out of sight.

The ranchman did not fire; it would have done no good, for the roper had not been in sight. One of Spellman's men had hurled the lariat from behind the ledge. To have shot thus would have meant waste of ammunition that might be needed badly within the next ten or fifteen minutes in the other direction.

CHAPTER XXIII

Ugly Proof

THERE was a yell of exultation from the rock ledge overhead, whence J. Rufus had been roped and dragged away. Then followed the clatter of horse's hoofs on the hard ground, out of view.

The noise had told Bravo Jim that some kind of trail had been cut through on this supposedly inaccessible promontory, for no horse could have traveled so swiftly otherwise. The block-and-tackle arrangement had unexpectedly disappeared also, indicating that this apparatus was movable, perhaps so fixed that it could be concealed among the rocks when not in use. It was certain that things had been going on here at this cave of which the owner of the land knew nothing. But even if Puerco cañon had been used as a smuggling center, Bravo Jim could not understand why it would be worth as much to Spellman as had originally been offered.

The sun was low in the western sky, paint-

ing the cañon walls in gold and vermillion, casting long purple shadows in the recesses of the rocky precipices. Baldy Carr was pulling in the rope ladder with his rawhide, ready to follow Rufus. The cowman called to Baldy not to make the ascent, fearing the others might be on the ledge waiting. Hastily he explained what had happened to the tenderfoot.

For answer, the veteran foreman jumped clear of the cave, swung in mid-air, and after gaining momentum, threw his weight against the cliff with his boots and plunged outward over the chasm. He let go as the ladder reached its peak over the spot where Bravo Jim had performed the same feat. In another moment Baldy had landed on his hands and knees, rolled over, and came to his feet, bruised but safe.

Ira Estes had drawn in the rope and was ready for the same attempt. Bravo Jim called to him to cut loose the rawhide that bound Big Olquin, back in the cave. Much as the renegade deserved punishment, his antagonist was unwilling to see him left in slow torture in the passage. It might be days before Bravo could return for him.

Within a few moments Big Olquin was at the entrance. The breed watched the fat cow-

boy seize the rope and swing back and forth, then make the perilous plunge across the gulch to safety.

"Come on, Olquin," shouted Bravo, grimly.

The renegade sensed that no trickery was intended. Using the rawhide, he pulled the ladder in, took hold, and made the swing. He landed dangerously near the edge of the chasm, so near that Bravo Jim reached out and grabbed him by the collar, saving him from a fall to his death.

"Now, Olie," said the cowman, cheerfully, "it's up to you to ante in and return the favor. Get back of that flat rock." Bravo's glance darted aslant of the setting sun to the party of five armed men ascending the long slope of the ridge a hundred yards away, with Anton Karg in their lead.

Again the Pole Corral man turned to Olquin. "Stay there until Karg gets up to that scrub oak, then you can poke up your face so he'll see you. And if you make a false move to betray our whereabouts, I'll drill you."

With that Bravo Jim gestured to Baldy and Ira, and the three crept along beyond the edge of the peak to a point two hundred feet west of Olquin.

The renegade band began to spread out as

they neared the summit. Bravo had counted on this, and he knew they would throw a semicircle about the conspicuous rock where Olquin was now in waiting, the location last marked by them as the hiding place of the foe they sought.

Five minutes later Karg and his men closed suddenly about the flat stone, guns leaping toward the unexpected quarry. A frightened half-breed countenance rose before them, and Bravo Jim's loud laugh was in their ears. "Put 'em high, boys, and start walking this way—Señor Olquin included!"

The ghastly face of Karg showed no emotion of anger or chagrin. The gunman obeyed the injunction readily.

The Pole Corral bunch strode forward now and relieved the five renegades of their pistols and two rifles. Baldy and Ira helped themselves to the choicest of the frontier-model forty-fives. The rifles were cast aside for recovery at a later date. The sun had sunk to rest and twilight mellowed the hills.

Karg had not uttered a word, nor did he protest at the order that took him and his four confederates down the side of the mountain toward the evening-dimmed pass of the gorge.

There, on both the desert side and in Puerco

cañon, the ranchman's eyes searched in the soft pink light for the blue roadster, in vain.

Since there were but three horses in the cañon, and six prisoners counting Olquin, transportation was a problem.

"Dan took the car," replied Karg to the cowman's question. "There's something about his taking the machine that would be mighty interesting to you, Bravo Jim."

The cowman did not heed the remark; instead he faced the gambler and spoke of another matter:

"There's a little leather book you've got on you, Karg—a diary. I want it."

The black-garbed renegade shrugged. "Want to read the sweet things she says about you, eh, Calhoun?" He laughed throatily. The ranchman yanked him around with a hefty left hand at the collar.

"Say anything like that again, and I'll flatten you, Karg," he warned. "Where's the little book?"

The cold eyes of the man contracted swiftly as he brought forth the diary and handed it over. "You'd be mighty interested to know something about that young lady, and what's happening to her before another day is out, Calhoun," he sneered.

“What’s happening to her?”

A slow grin came to the cadaverous countenance. “Plumb anxious to know, aren’t you, Bravo Jim? I didn’t miss my bet a bit when I said you was sweet on her, eh? And she on you! I——”

“Enough of this, Karg. You and Spellman will have your claws pulled before you can do any more harm to folks hereabouts. Now get going!”

The speculator did not move, but grinned his ghastly grin full in his captor’s face: “If I told you that Miss Fay was already on her way somewhere, and she wasn’t coming back single any more, why, what would you say to that, Bravo Jim?”

The ranchman’s fists hardened. Karg chuckled. “My hole card is one great big ace, Bravo. I’m trading. Every damn man of us here rides free, or my mouth stays shut.”

Although the gambler might be expected to try pure bluff or treachery, or both, something in his manner now told Bravo Jim that he possessed information that was vital. Dan Spellman had already made his threat about Miss Fay, and the cowman knew the sudden turn in affairs at the cave would hasten the magnate’s designs.

"I'll tell you where the Old Man's taking her—right now, tonight—and you'd give your right hand, Calhoun, to get her back from there if you knew——"

"Juarez?" demanded the cowman, hotly. The word had leaped from his throat impulsively, without thought of Karg, and his tone held not only anger but dread.

The other smiled. "Don't you wish you knew? You'd save a mighty lot of gas or horse flesh if you were certain, Bravo—before you hit the trail. Time's fleeing. It's getting dark already. Turn us loose, hombre, and I'll name the place."

Bravo Jim hesitated. With each word of the renegade, fear for the innocent victim of this conspiracy had grown until Bravo's overwhelming concern was for her safety.

"Name the place first, Karg. With the proof."

"Now you're talking, Bravo!" The gunman's eyes were glistening in the gathering dark. "You promise to turn us loose if I prove where's she's gone with Spellman to be married—willing or not?"

"If you name the place and prove it, Karg."

"Juarez is right."

"I don't believe it. She wouldn't cross the

border with him, not trusting such a scoundrel."

"The Old Man's too wise for that," chuckled Karg. "He's decoying her over the bridge at El Paso, openly, this evening, on the trail of J. Rufus Renshaw, the hombre that's got drunk and has crossed the line to light up the border with red liquor——"

"That's too thin, Karg. Rufus couldn't be taken over the international bridge against his will by his captors, past the customs and immigration officers."

"Of course he couldn't." The gambler's tone was quietly triumphant. "The Old Man was going to tell Rufus that *Miss Fay was decoyed over there by me!*"

"It's a lie," declared Bravo, doggedly. "You haven't seen Spellman since Rufus was roped on that hill——"

"Even so, he figured the whole thing out an hour ago, and everything has come about like clockwork since. That's the program and I'll wager it's being carried out. It's a cinch Rufie would be willing to go to Juarez when he thought his sweetie was being taken there by me. It's a cinch she would trot over after him to save him from the red-eye. He beats it to Juarez to find her, and she beats it there to find him. Sabe?"

The cowman's jaw hardened to steel. "You haven't proved this, Karg."

"I will. Light out for Chamizal and ask your amigo Tom Jeffry, or anybody else, if a bunch of machines carrying these folks didn't hit for the border after sundown tonight, Spellman's blue roadster included. Then we go free. That all right?"

Baldy Carr put in a word: "But, Bravo, we'll lose a heck of a lot of time, with only three horses, trying to tote these hombres in to verify these things!"

The Pole Corral boss made a quick and surprising decision. "Get out—all of you!"

He started toward the cañon, gesturing to Baldy and Ira to follow. Bravo had determined upon this course, knowing that every second was precious if the renegade had told the truth, and it was too great a risk to delay for investigation.

In the gorge the ranchman recovered the hat that had been shot from his head. The three Pole Corral horses, still saddled, were located at the head of the cul-de-sac, and the race for Chamizal was on.

The direct route from Puerco cañon led down past Badger Buttes and Moon Mesa, directly through the Pole Corral home base

and the ranch house. Bravo Jim forced his mount to the utmost, thankful that the animals were in the pink of condition after their day's rest. He led his two famished but plucky companions directly for his home. A brief minute could be taken there to learn how his mother and sister had fared during his absence, for he had been uneasy more than once for their safety during the war on the range.

It may have been some intuition that had led him here now—he did not know. At any rate, when he galloped up to the veranda of the old house, just off the road, he caught, in the light of the porch lantern, a glimpse of his mother mounting a saddle horse. Not only was this unusual, but her whole attitude was one of excitement and desperate hurry. Bravo dashed through the yard to her.

“Mother! What's happened?”

“Oh, Jim!” The woman's voice held a sob. “I've just learned that Rufus Renshaw, your new cowboy, slipped up here a little while ago in your car and took Julie——”

“Took Julie!” Bravo Jim was stunned. He had somehow never thought of his own sister in connection with these things that had suddenly engaged the attention of the Double Diamond renegades.

"Yes—oh, they've gone, Jim! And Renshaw was drunk—so drunk he staggered. Tomas heard him tell Julie some story that she would have to go with him to El Paso and over to Juarez tonight to save you, Jim. But it wasn't that——" Her voice faltered.

"Jim." Mrs. Calhoun looked at her son appealingly. "That man and Julie were secretly engaged—he won her consent two days after he came here. She had just confessed it to me. She wouldn't have gone with him tonight, with him intoxicated, but that he knew enough to argue it was to save you, her brother. He's really taken her down there on an elopement, though she doesn't dream it——"

"Mother! It won't happen!" Bravo wheeled his mount and galloped swiftly toward town, with Baldy and Ira tearing after him.

In Chamizal he learned of the cars that had gone south—three of them in all. He hired Tom Jeffry to drive him to El Paso in the best automobile available. Ira seized two loaves of bread from the eating house for a feast in the car; the trio drank at the garage hydrant while Jeffry got out the machine, and the dash to the border began.

As the automobile ploughed down the dusty valley road, Ira and Baldy in the tonneau ex-

changed whispered words while they gnawed at the unbuttered bread. They were very much worried about some phases of this night excursion. Finally Ira leaned forward.

"I reckon Rufus has got drunk right, Bravo! And been bribed by them rascals, too. The whole thing looks to me li'le a dead-fall—like it was set up to get you acrost the river into Mexico tonight. Dan Spellman owns half uh Juarez, they say, and——" His eyes rolled. "You let me and Baldy cross over first and see——"

"Don't bother, boys," said Bravo, tearing off a chunk of the dry bread. "I'm trying to think of a way to cross the river into Mexico without putting up our guns."

CHAPTER XXIV

Over the Border

THE trail of two of the three cars that had preceded Bravo Jim to the border was picked up with ease in every town to and including the big Pass City. The other machine had been lost trace of long before El Paso was reached; there was no way to tell which one, because there had been a man and a girl in each of two cars, and one of these was not heard of after leaving Chamizal. The third machine held four persons, presumably Dan Spellman's hired men, border dive habitués posing as cowboys, lesser lights in the absence of Karg and Olquin. Bravo Jim was sure the last named could not have got away from Puerco cañon soon enough to play a part now.

With their weapons and cartridge belts concealed under the seats of Tom Jeffry's car, the Pole Corral trio reached the Santa Fe Street bridge across the Rio Grande at Juarez. No persons of the description given had crossed here, according to Inspector Dick Worley, once a range rider for Bravo Jim.

Next the Stanton Street bridge was tried, and the same information was forthcoming. "Something crooked about those fellows you're after?" the bridge man wanted to know.

"Might be," the ranchman evaded. He had purposely discarded the notion of enlisting the aid of the police, not knowing how far the ramifications of Spellman's influence had extended in recent months. He had not forgotten that the border magnate held some sort of an appointment in the law-enforcement regime, incredible as that fact seemed.

"Try the Island. Most of 'em that have anything to hide hit for there."

Bravo Jim had had this spot in mind from the beginning; in fact had stopped at the bridges only because they were not far out of the way. Cordova Island, he knew, was a shoe-shaped area of land adjoining East El Paso, on the northern or American side of the Rio Grande, and yet in Mexican territory. This freak situation was due to the fact that the river bed had fixed the international boundary under the treaty of 1848, with lands made by accretion, and since then the stream had shifted over an oxbow loop to the southward; hence the Rio Grande was no longer the boundary at this point.

The Island was a Paradise of smugglers and lawbreakers, for the reason they did not have to cross the river to jump to Mexico or vice versa. From the south these could cross the stream without being arrested by U. S. officers, still being in Mexican territory.

Ploughing through the darkened dusty streets below the old Franklin canal, in the adobe section of El Paso, Tom Jeffry followed Bravo Jim's directions toward the Island. "If Spellman was takin' Miss Fay agin her will," said Ira, "he'd hit for there, but if she was goin' along voluntary, thinkin' she was huntin' her licker-lappin' Rufus, why then Dan would 'a' hit one uh the bridges."

"Yeah, but how about Julie?" Baldy wanted to know. "Like as not that drunken tender-foot is forcing her to travel. If he's been bribed by the Old Man, he's working with him to run Bravo's sister over to Juarez. And Dan would head this way, to prevent a fuss. The machines separated, one of them taking the desert road, but they'd meet down here somewhere, likely."

Jeffry's car neared the edge of the Island. Questions were asked, and the trail grew hotter. Two customs line riders whom Bravo knew had seen three cars; others had seen

three. One of the machines contained only a driver, so far as they could see, though someone may have been out of sight in the tonneau. Other civilians and guards, immigration men, pointed out the route of the three machines.

"Mayhap some uh these hombres have been posted to steer us acrost at the Island," grumbled Ira. "Like as not the Old Man wants us to know he crossed here, so's we'll foller him."

"Why'd he do that?" Baldy wanted to know.

"Bein' the King uh Juarez, off an' on, he'd have his friends fixed to handle us, wouldn't he? Not that I got cold feet. I'm spoilin' for a scrap. But we c'n be on our toes, ev'ry minute."

The possibility of a "plant" did not deter Bravo Jim. Leaving the car in charge of Jeffry in the darkness along Corona Street, he set the example by thrusting his Colt gun into his hip pocket and filling his other pockets with cartridges. With the weapons out of view, the Americans would appear unarmed should they meet a none too critical guard on either side of the line.

Just now Bravo Jim avoided the American line riders and customs men with more care

than he did the Mexican fiscal guards. Watching his chance where the patrol was thin, he slipped across the invisible boundary into the mesquite and tornillo on hands and knees, waiting for Ira and Baldy to follow.

Behind him were the adobes of Park Street, El Paso, before him the open field of the Island, on the Mexican side. Here died old Cesario Martinez, king of the smugglers, and Big Chief Jose Hinojos, paymaster of the rum runners, an account of which Bravo Jim had read in the El Paso papers.

Past the border line, the cowman rose and walked in the open toward the gloomy field and the lighted cantina flying the red, white and green flag of Mexico, notice to all the thirsty that they might imbibe here to their heart's desire.

Under the glare of a huge oil lamp a pair of steeple-hatted Rurales lounged against the saloon wall. Bravo Jim was not unaware of the presence of others, officers and suspicious-looking Mexican civilians, at and near the entrance to the cantina. Nearest at hand was a Mexican youth in white collar, neatly pressed trousers, dapper gray sombrero; he was toying with a cane, and sauntered out near the approaching Americans.

"Your friends, señores, are inside the cantina, awaiting your arrival," he said in good English.

"Thanks." Bravo Jim walked aside with his two companions, the better to gain a view of the interior of the place through the open door.

"That hombre shore was planted for us," declared Ira, cautiously. "I wouldn't give a hoot for our chances here without we had guns. The Old Man has got his Mex amigos all heeled and ready to meet us-alls!"

Bravo Jim made no comment, but he knew that Ira had spoken the truth. His object now was to learn whether the girls had actually been brought here, or whether they had been spirited away while Dan Spellman's Mexican confederates laid a trap for the Pole Corral men. He strolled about the place, watching the lighted upstairs windows as well as those below, at the sides and rear, where he judged there were enclosed booths.

He did not doubt that he and his Pole Corral friends were observed; he had left the others out in the darkened field, for the moon had not yet risen, and he continued his careless stroll about the place at a distance.

He had been around the rear of the cantina

once and was moving around again, eyes alert, when he halted with great suddenness. His heart pounded fiercely; his whole being tense with emotion. In the bright light behind a dirty, fly-specked downstairs window he saw the head and shoulders of a girl; her back was turned, but he could not mistake the shimmering lustre of the hair of chestnut gold.

He moved backward quickly, toward his companions. At that instant the shade was drawn by an unseen hand.

"Boys, we've got to bust into there, pronto," he said. A moment later the trio stood in the shadows and discussed the mode of attack. Undue haste might spoil everything.

Had he been able to look through the slatted doors of the barroom he would have beheld a disheartening scene. J. Rufus Renshaw, with four evil-looking punchers of the Double Diamond, was standing drunkenly at the bar. Of the five, the tenderfoot was the only one who did not carry a gun openly exposed in a belt holster. In spite of Mexican regulations, these Texas civilians, recruited for the Chamizal rancho from the riffraff of illegal border gambling dens and liquor dives, were "heeled" without disguise. Dan Spellman had looked to this, arranging it with his Mexican friends,

including the comandante, that these punchers should not be disarmed.

There were several listless peons and loafer Americans in the place also, but these had given the center of the stage to the hilarious Rufus, who had been ordering round after round of drinks for the four cowboys, and who, at the moment, swayed back and forth at the rail singing a maudlin song.

Within an adjoining "family" booth, a sort of small dining room with a "Ladies' Entrance" sign at the side door, a man and a girl were seated at a table covered with soiled linen. Dan Spellman was watching the girl with crafty eyes.

"Only thing to do is to wait a spell, Miss Fay," he said, soothingly. "Rufus wouldn't listen to you any more than he would me. But we'll get him out of this place pretty soon. What I can't figure is what a handsome, talented girl like you sees in that physical and mental wreck—why you'd risk coming to a place like this to drag him away."

The girl's blue eyes snapped. "You do not understand," she said. "I am the only one who has ever been able to handle him. He was doing so well—getting along like a new man—I thought this would never happen again."

"And still you'll go on fussing and worrying about a weakling like him!" The magnate's florid face registered disgust. "Women beat me. And here I am begging you to marry me. Lord knows, I'd be able to give you money, reputation, position—that is, as much standing as a western capitalist could give a girl of your breeding. I don't claim to be anything fancy, but——"

"Please don't speak of it, Mr. Spellman. I'm going out to talk to him again!"

"Listen." Dan Spellman blocked her way out into the barroom, where, through the partly opened door, J. Rufus was bawling forth the rollicking lines of a University song. "I can't allow a girl like you to go out there among that drunken lot! Rufus can't hold his legs much longer—he'll be under the table in a half an hour. Then we'll bundle him into the car and hit for home."

The girl hesitated; she had already been rebuffed by the tenderfoot. Dan Spellman smiled broadly. "Yeah, we'll get him home all jake. But I want to serve warning," he chuckled, in mock levity, "I'm not carting home that rum-soak to see you marry him! I'm plumb jealous. I'm saving him—but you've got to marry me. Miss—Miss—Mary or whatever your name

is—you haven't ever told me—I'm dead gone on you!" He put out his arms in a lame gesture of pleading, moving closer to her. "I'm crazy about you. I love you! I've got to have you——"

"Get back, Dan Spellman. I wouldn't marry you if you were the last man on earth!"

The florid countenance froze into hard lines, and the crafty eyes contracted swiftly. "So that's what you think of me, eh? You'd take a drunkard——"

"It's a lie, Spellman. He is not a drunkard, and for that matter I have never said I would marry him."

"You didn't, eh?" The man thrust his blocky head forward. "Then what the hades you coming to a joint like this to get him home for? It's that hombre Calhoun, after all, eh? Like you wrote in that diary that Karg snatched from you. Say! If I thought you and Bravo Jim was——" Hot blood burned in the big veins of the magnate's cheeks and jowls. Suddenly he slammed shut the door leading into the barroom. He laughed at her when she gave him a look of contempt and loathing. And when she stepped quickly to the door he strode in front of her.

"I was willing to take that soak home to-

night, if you'd play decent and give me your word we'd get married. But you wouldn't have me if I was the last man in the world, eh?" The magnate laughed huskily. "I'll tell you something. Dan Spellman hasn't ever set his heart on a thing he didn't get, sabe? The harder they come, the better Dan Spellman likes it. That's how I got what I own today—by fighting for it. Now I reckon I'm going to play this game the same sweet way!"

"My, what a tough person you are," said the girl, scornfully. "Let go of that door!" She raised a rounded, athletic right arm and struck him across the face.

The man's big hand reached out and drove her against the wall, seizing her forearm. He twisted the member, held her. "I reckon now I'll play my hand, lady!"

"Release me, you contemptible smuggler!" Her eyes met the cunning orbs of the Double Diamond boss, challenged them. A bitter laugh came from the man. "It's a lie. Bravo Jim's been talking to you. I'm an officer. Didn't I show you my badge? My job is to run down the smugglers—especially the rum runners—and I'm doing it. Miss Fay, I'm plumb sorry we had this row, but if you'll forgive me——"

"Forgive you? I'll see you in jail, before I leave the Rio Grande, Spellman. You tried to make me think Bravo Jim was a rum runner, a diamond smuggler and thief, importer of silks and laces and jewels against the law. While you were the one who was head of this big smuggling syndicate yourself! Oh, I know."

"And you was posing as my little niece," sneered Spellman. "I was supposed to be your uncle!" He laughed harshly. "Don't you savvy what folks will say when they find out you was boarding at a bachelor's ranch, posing as his niece? When I tell folks about that little trick, I reckon your reputation won't be so danged spotless among the younger set back on Long Island, lady!"

She stared at him, unspeaking.

"Yes, ma'am. When I start talking, your rep won't be so high and mighty back home or on the Rio, either! Come to think of it, I've got a minister friend in Juarez that I can find muy pronto. I wasn't going to rush you, but hanged if I don't have an idea to make you marry me, right here in Juarez tonight!"

"Go ahead and talk your head off, Spellman," she retorted, coldly. "Now get away from that door." She struck at him, her hand

clapping his cheek with a resounding smack that made the red spot redder. He seized both her wrists, held her back against the wall.

"If I told you I bribed your good friend J. Rufus Renshaw to play my game here to-night, and to bring Julie Calhoun to this dive with him——"

Her face went white. "Oh, no!——"

"Oh, yeah!" chuckled Spellman. "And that's not all. That skunk Bravo Jim Calhoun, that's been nosing into my game ever since I leased the Chaves place—that hombre is here, too, and he and his sister——" He released her. "Don't go out of here, now, Miss, or Julie and Bravo both will be shot full of holes or worse before you take ten steps."

He opened the door, strode out and pulled J. Rufus, staggering and hilarious, back into the booth.

"Heh, Rufus, old kid!" he sang out, as he yanked the young tenderfoot within. "Where'd you take Julie?"

Rufus stared groggily at the pair.

"Tell Miss Fay, if you're not too drunk, J. Rufus."

"Julie hopped out of the car somewheres," said the tenderfoot, in a thick voice. "Sh' gave me the slip near Chamizal. I had too many

drinks, I suppose." He hiccoughed, lurched to the side of the little room.

The girl stepped to him. "Rufus, you've got to come with me! You know me, don't you, Rufus?"

"G'way!" The tenderfoot brushed her aside. "I wanna 'nother drink!" He staggered to the door and out.

Dan Spellman looked at the girl and laughed. "Well, I reckon he was too drunk to hold onto Julie. But that don't make any difference far as Bravo is concerned. Did you notice that greaser by the door give me the wink? That means Bravo is right out there now! And I'm not Dan Spellman, owner of mines and cattle and the Keno Palace in Juarez, if that hombre Bravo don't get his, inside of five short minutes." He strode quickly to the window of the booth, raised the shade he had a short time before pulled down.

"Look out there, lady!" he commanded, cheerily. As she went to the window, the man pointed to the dusky figures, a score in number, now gathered at the rear of the cantina.

"They're Dan Spellman's amigos, every one of them—out to earn an honest penny. More of them are all around this building. Soon as Bravo Jim steps inside the barroom door out

there, he'll be shot down. You noticed those greasers at the end of the bar inside? Every one of 'em is heeled, and that don't count the four waddies that have been drinking with Rufus. Now we'll sit down and wait for the fireworks."

For answer, Miss Fay darted for the booth door. Dan Spellman, his crafty eyes alert for such a move, reached out and held her. "No, you don't warn him. If you did, it wouldn't do any good. He'd be shot anyway. If you want to save your Bravo Calhoun, it's up to you."

She looked at him with eyes that flashed and yet were filled with fear. "You are a devil, Dan Spellman, a smuggler, murderer and fiend. What do you demand of me to let Rufus and Bravo Jim go back to the American side unharmed?——" She broke off, a sudden suspicion leaping to her eyes. "I believe you lie! I do not think Bravo Jim is out there!"

The man opened the door. "I'll show you. Come with me." As he started, he pulled her back, changing his mind. He turned her aside, behind the entrance. "Look—there!"

The swinging doors of the cantina parted. The familiar lanky figure of Bravo Jim Calhoun entered, and trailing him were Baldy Carr

and Ira Estes. The young owner of the Pole Corral sauntered up toward the bar.

Dan Spellman laughed easily. "He'll be killed like a coyote the minute I give the word. A dozen gun-fighters around this cantina will close in on the joint when the first shot is fired—not counting what these waddies of mine will do—and they're lead-slinging hombres from Texas."

"Name your price, Dan Spellman," she said, her blue eyes like ice.

"Come with me, *now*, to Juarez to see the padre."

"Call in your men and tell them Bravo Jim and his friends and Rufus are to go back safe."

Spellman crooked a finger toward the swart Mexican near the door. He spoke in Spanish. Miss Fay had studied the language in school and understood him. He told the Mexican Bravo Jim and his two men and Rufus were to be unmolested.

"Now come with me," he said shortly, and opened the side door into the hall.

With the border capitalist, the tenderfoot girl left the cantina. But as Spellman turned, he made a significant gesture toward the Mexican whom he had called to the booth. The

sign told the Latin that the original orders were to stand.

J. Rufus had staggered out into the night. "Follow him," said Bravo Jim, in a whisper to Ira Estes. With Baldy Carr he strode toward the rear end of the barroom.

There was a wait of several minutes, during which the cowman followed the eyes of the Double Diamond punchers and the Mexicans scattered about the room. He read in the shifty glance of the renegades a sense of subdued excitement. At this juncture J. Rufus lurched back into the cantina.

Bravo Jim walked up and placed a hand upon the staggering man's shoulder. "Where are Julie and Miss Fay, Renshaw?" he asked, grimly. Ira Estes sauntered back into the room.

J. Rufus turned steel gray eyes upon the Pole Corral cowman. His look belied the wavering uncertainty of his legs. "Your sister is safe," he said, steadily. "I'll see if I can find Miss Fay."

He laughed groggily, lurched forward toward the booth. As he placed his hand upon the door and pulled it open, he uttered a piercing cry:

“Go for your guns, Bravo! They’ve framed you!” He jumped clear of the door into the booth.

On that instant there was the barely audible sound of cocking revolvers, and the Mexican at the outer door whispered to the dusky gunmen behind him: “Ahora!—Now!”

The low-ceilinged room of the cantina thundered with the roar of flaming revolvers.

CHAPTER XXV

Words of Joy

WITH the crash of the forty-fives, the lights in the cantina went out; not that they had been shot out or the globes of the oil-burners on the two chandeliers shattered, but they had been literally snuffed out by the concussion of the five or six explosions in the stuffy room.

Bravo Jim Calhoun was still in motion. He had counted upon the darkness in the event of battle, for he had observed the dimensions of the cantina barroom on entering, and he had uttered low words of warning to Baldy Carr and Ira Estes as to what they should do in such an event.

Bravo Jim had entered prepared for gun-play, for the presence of armed Mexicans about the place had told him much. Further, a glance over the slatted doors before entering had revealed to him the presence of the four Double Diamond renegades and what their loitering here meant. Then when J. Rufus had shouted

his warning of a trap, Bravo Jim knew there was to be action speedily.

It had all happened in the wake of the tenderfoot cowboy's startled cry, forcing the hands of the would-be assassins before they were quite ready, as evidenced by their disorganized attack. Bravo had seen the Mexican at the door stab for a silver-handled gun on the same instant that the nearest of the Double Diamond renegades had drawn.

With no time for fine calculations, the cowman had fired instinctively at the nearest menace. His weapon had tilted to the unknown puncher's shoulder, near enough to the arm to turn him and stay his gun hand; yet the fellow had managed to fire. Bravo did not feel his charge, which told him that his own ball had reached its target. In the flicker of the wavering lights in the first burst of fire, Bravo Jim had seen the big-hatted Mexican in the doorway spinning on his heels, and he knew that either Ira or Baldy had met the renegade lead for lead. Pitch black darkness ensued to the accompaniment of two more trailing shots.

Then three figures leaped upward upon the bar, and Bravo knew that Baldy and Ira were both on their feet. The stillness of death en-

sued, with not even a groan from the Mexican at the door or the puncher who had stopped the cowman's bullet. The leap to the bar had been part of Bravo's strategy, planned to follow the snuffing of the oil-lamps. He knew that no renegade hand would be raised so long as there was only darkness, for fear each might kill the other.

He knew, too, that no one would produce a light so long as hostile guns were at large within the room. And if some eye should pierce the gloom near the windows that reflected dim starlight, risking a shot at some human shadow, the victim would not be one of the Pole Corral, all of whom were now off the floor. No shot would be directed above man-height, and Bravo, Ira and Baldy were now high on the bar, their heads near the ceiling, or, in Bravo's own case, touching it at a stoop.

The same uncertainty that gripped the smuggling clan about their human targets applied equally, the cowman knew, to the paid assassins of Dan Spellman outside. Mexicans who had started to invade the cantina had hastily halted their steps or had withdrawn farther from the building.

Things could not remain at a stalemate indefinitely, Bravo realized, nor did he want

them to do so. J. Rufus had leaped into the booth on sounding his warning that an ambush had been set for the Pole Corral trio. He had said he would see if he could find Miss Fay. To locate her and his sister had been Bravo's chief object in this expedition. And while Rufus had declared that Bravo's sister Julie was safe, there was the fate of Miss Fay yet to be considered.

Bravo Jim had marveled about the strange transformation in J. Rufus Renshaw's bearing just before the gunplay had taken place, and he found his confidence in the tenderfoot almost completely restored. Although he had said little about this latest escapade of the Easterner, the ranchman had accepted the ugly facts against his will. Bravo had liked J. Rufus from the start; he had done his best to encourage the man in the fight to rehabilitate himself. The tenderfoot's record had been clean and he had proved himself a man under trying circumstances. Up until the incident in the cave, he had not tasted liquor since his employment on the Pole Corral, and then the stuff had been poured down his throat. Thus Bravo had been willing to overlook much; he had only begun to doubt J. Rufus after the flight of Julie with him. Even then the cowman be-

lieved circumstances might explain this deed in an unexpected way.

He knew now for a certainty that J. Rufus was loyal to the Pole Corral, since his warning to Bravo had precipitated this battle—before the renegades were quite ready. Perhaps that had been the tenderfoot's motive. As for his inebriated condition, Bravo had seen enough to know that he was not as intoxicated as he outwardly appeared.

These things passed swiftly in the cowman's mind. Where was Miss Fay now, and Spellman? Bravo had not seen the Double Diamond boss when he had entered the cantina, which had surprised him. If Julie had been brought here, she had come with Renshaw, and J. Rufus had said she was safe. In spite of his former doubts, the cowman believed him. If Julie was out of all danger, it was because she had never been brought here. This would explain why Bravo's inspector friends had insisted they had seen a car of the new touring model's description with only one occupant—the driver.

Not a man in the darkened room had stirred. Through the murky windows a trace of starlight revealed one crouched and waiting figure at the barroom wall. Otherwise the room was

Stygian black. Vague forms were visible on the outside, skulking nearer the building. Bravo Jim decided upon a speedy move to learn the whereabouts of Miss Fay, without knowing that she had some time since left the cantina with Dan Spellman on the way to the "padre" in Juarez. The cowman's voice broke the tense stillness:

"Come a-smoking now, gentlemen, or get ready to hand over your guns! If you fire, you can't see us, and we'll spot your flame and pick you off." He repeated the injunction in Spanish, then added to it:

"There are three of us, and we know where each one of the three is. You're a dozen or thereabouts, and you don't know in the dark who's who or where. We hold high card. Now those that want to walk out of this joint alive will feel around till you find the end of the bar nearest the door, then walk along the top-rail with your guns above your head. Sabe?"

He repeated the directions until there could be no doubt of the exact course to be followed, making every word clear also in Spanish. The three Pole Corral men were near the center of the bar, where they could take possession of the weapons as the dive habitués and Double Diamond renegades walked past.

There was a tense moment of uncertainty, then a shuffling of feet. "Remember," cautioned Bravo Jim, "no tricks if you think you see a gringo to shoot at as you come along, because if you do, your flame will betray you. And even if you get one of us, the other two will plug you sure—and you'll die for your pains! Now don't crowd—Americanos will take their places in line with the Mex."

"Don't move, hombres," snarled a voice in a far corner. "He's runnin' a mighty blazer."

If there were Mexicans in the room who understood, there were others who did not. At any rate, a form moved along the bar, then one more, and Bravo Jim with arm outstretched, collected the weapons as they traveled by him in the darkness. He likewise appropriated their hats and gave them his and Baldy's, taking the sombreros for Ira and Baldy, and collecting one for himself when the third Mexican passed.

Four more made the trail along the bar, giving over their six-shooters.

"Coming, Americanos?" snapped the cowman. "In a minute now there's going to be smoke if you don't!"

After a prolonged stillness, spur chains rattled along the floor. "We're holding our guns along the line of the bar, gents, in case there's

any trickery," announced Bravo, cheerfully. "If any hombre fires, pick him off pronto, boys!"

Three punchers, judged by the tread of their boots, gave over their weapons. "There's about three more Mexicans and maybe another Tehanno," said the ranchman, pleasantly. "Boys, one of you strike a match—I'll do it—and the other two start shooting—Whoa, hold that match a minute!" The recalcitrants were in motion.

Three more passed with their guns overhead. Bravo shook out the shells and piled the weapons at his feet on the bar. Then he struck a match, thrusting it out at arm's length with his left hand for safety if it drew fire, and jutting his gun barrel forward.

There was no lurking renegade who offered fight, and Bravo tossed the match aside. Darkness fitted his purposes now very well. The group who had been disarmed stood at the rear end of the room. There was a possibility that some of these had held out a second gun. Reaching down and touching the nearest of the renegades on the shoulder, Bravo Jim commanded him to climb up on the bar.

That done, the cowman conferred a low-spoken message to Baldy and Ira to jump down

and walk near the front door, slightly aside from the slatted entrance and any of the windows, so that shots from outside would not reach them when the cantina was again lighted. Then he ordered the Mexican on the bar to reach up and light the nearest lamp, handing him matches as he did so. Bravo Jim, gun in hand, hopped down behind the long serving counter.

When the prisoner had complied with orders, and the cantina was again revealed in the light of a big oil-lamp, the cowman moved along the back-bar and toward the booth where J. Rufus had left the main saloon. There was no need for him to tell Ira and Baldy to keep the occupants of the cantina covered.

While they did so, Bravo made a complete search of the building, upstairs and down. Miss Fay was not to be found, nor was Spellman. Except for two Mexican women in an upstairs room, the cantina held all the occupants of the place.

The discovery was a grievously disappointing one. The ranchman returned to the cantina, called the prisoners one by one to the front of the room, made certain they held no concealed weapons, then commanded one of them to bring the empty guns to him from the bar. These he

divided between Baldy and Ira and himself, to prevent their falling into the hands of their owners, shoving them into every available pocket and into his boot-tops, with cartridges.

There were still armed Mexicans about the cantina, he knew, but how many there was no way of telling. Shooting out the light, this time by breaking the lamp, he ordered the prisoners to start through the front door on a run.

When the motley crowd swarmed out to the sand-drifted street, Bravo, Baldy and Ira, all wearing Mexican sombreros, went with them. The ruse prevented an ambush from without, for the prisoners called to their paisanos not to shoot. The three Pole Corral men, running closely together, struck out for the American line.

They were observed, now, in the starlight, and flame spat from the neighborhood of the cantina. The trio gave sharp answer and flattened on the ground.

"Where now?" Baldy wanted to know, reloading his gun, while the others filled up their cylinders. Bravo had been moving toward the international line on hands and knees, occasionally going down flat and firing as a six-shooter spoke.

"That devil's taken her to Juarez; there's no other joint on this Island. River's pretty high and the quickest way around for us is by the El Paso bridges, in the machine. We've got to find her tonight, *and soon!*" declared Bravo, chagrin and dread possessing him more than he was willing to admit. There was a sudden burst of fire in the field several hundred yards from the cantina, to the west.

"They're not shooting at us!" cried Ira, excitedly. "It's some other party—might be someone fightin' for us! Where'd Rufus go?"

"Come on, we'll see!" Bravo Jim was on his feet and racing, the others at his heels. A dark object was soon revealed in the open space ahead, and a vigorous attack was being made upon it, as shown by jets of flame to the left and right. Feeble response came from the shadowy hulk. In another moment Bravo Jim perceived that it was an automobile.

"Give that car a hand!" cried the ranchman, firing as he ran. He was convinced that the automobile held some foe of Spellman, else the smuggler band at the cantina would not be joining in the attack upon it.

The brisk fire of Bravo's little bunch caused the renegades to waver and fall back, though they had not ceased to shoot. The three Pole

Corral men, replying to the attackers vigorously, reached the car.

“We’re Americans—friends!” he called, thinking the machine might contain U. S. customs guards who would mistake them for other Mexicans because of their appropriated sombreros.

“Oh, Rufus—that was Bravo Jim’s voice!” The joyful words were spoken by the tender-foot girl whom they had been seeking.

CHAPTER XXVI

“There’s Millions In It”

THE fire of Bravo Jim and his companions must have been very effective, for the Mexicans had fallen back to the shelter of the cantina. The main body of the smugglers, those who had been in the saloon, were still disarmed, Bravo knew, for he and Ira and Baldy had taken their weapons. J. Rufus had obtained a gun somewhere, as shown by the stiff fight he had put up against the renegades. On the arrival of the rescuers, the tenderfoot jumped hastily from the car, lifted the hood and worked with the distributor.

“I put this machine out of commission—I’ll explain later,” he declared, in a voice thoroughly sober. The car was Dan Spellman’s blue roadster. Working rapidly, J. Rufus got the ignition back into shape and called to Bravo and his companions to hop aboard. The machine hummed and started for the American line. More shots came now from the cantina, to which the cowmen gave reply as they sped across the field.

They reached the line, and did not try to avoid the American customs guards. "We've had a fight with a gang of smugglers," Bravo explained. "We may be followed, and would like to keep our guns."

The inspectors were liberal, and when their flashlights had revealed American faces under the steeple-hatted sombreros, granted the request. The guards had heard the firing, helpless to interfere because the fight had occurred on Mexican soil.

"Now for home!" exclaimed the tenderfoot. "'Gangway' Dan is on the way to the Organs to stage the biggest cleanup in the history of the Rio!"

"Gangway Dan?" queried Bravo. "You mean Spellman? But how did you find Miss Fay—and where is Julie?" These and many other matters were still a mystery. It was the irony of fate that the tenderfoot cowboy should have been the real center of this drama, getting more information and accomplishing more results than the ranchman himself.

"I'll talk fast as we travel," said Rufus. "Here is Tom Jeffry with the other machines." Along the quiet side street the garage man had remained on guard with the cars, and now a rapid change was made. Abandoning Spell-

man's roadster, Bravo, Renshaw and the girl took the ranchman's touring car that had been driven here by Rufus. Baldy and Ira rode in Jeffry's machine.

Starting through the adobe-lined streets of East El Paso, Rufus touched the big points first: "No, I wasn't drunk—that was a pose. Julie's been home for hours. Spellman didn't bribe me, but he thought he did! Yes, I found Miss Fay—in time."

"You're a wonder, Rufus," declared the girl. "I understand now why you wouldn't listen to me in the cantina. You should have given me a hint, but I know you could not because Dan Spellman was with us all the time, and you were playing a game."

It was an amazing story of daring and intrigue that J. Rufus Renshaw, tenderfoot, related on the way from El Paso up the Rio Grande valley, always modestly and without boasting. To Bravo Jim his story focused on the remaining conspiracy of the night—that Spellman, known by an inner junta of the underworld of Juarez as Gangway Dan, was making a race to head off a hundred-thousand-dollar shipment of contraband liquors scheduled to pass over Moon Mesa within the next four hours. He had received the tip unex-

pectedly from his subordinates at the moment he was trying to take Miss Fay to the "padre."

"He wouldn't have let her go even then, if it wasn't that I jinxed his car for him, disconnecting the distributor," chuckled Rufus, "and Miss Fay wouldn't go through with her bargain when she heard the firing in the cantina, knowing Dan had betrayed her on the agreement."

To go back, Bravo Jim got the highlights of the night's events in chronological order. From the time the tenderfoot cowboy climbed the rope ladder out of the cave he was a prisoner of Spellman, "the Old Man" of what was presumed to be a notorious smuggling syndicate. The pseudo cattleman had already "rescued" Miss Fay and sent her back to the Double Diamond rancho with one of his riders. Then Spellman, always working with Karg, the gunman, had determined on a fool-proof ruse to destroy Bravo Jim, seeing the cowman's sensational escape from the cave.

Posing as the friend and rescuer of Miss Fay, he did not hesitate to use her as "bait" in his scheme to lure Bravo Jim and his men over the border, where he believed his hirelings would dispose of his foes with certainty and dispatch.

He revealed his plans to Karg. Renshaw, the prisoner, found the pose of a drunken man very effective, and he had overheard much.

"Soon as I found he was planning to run me over the border to lure Miss Fay over, I fell in with his plans, knowing he'd take me over anyway, by force. Still pretending to be half-seas-over, I let him bribe me with a hundred-dollar bill and the promise of a better job on the Double Diamond. Well, you know how it worked."

"But why did you take Julie?" Bravo Jim wanted to know, still much puzzled.

"Forgot to mention that. The Old Man conceived the idea at the last minute that you might be too foxy to go over after Miss Fay—you might not believe she went to Juarez. To make sure, he decided to send a bunch to the Pole Corral and get your sister. Then he concluded if I could be bribed to pull that trick, it would be all the better. Knowing he'd take your sister anyway, I fell in with the scheme, intending to free her. Still posing as drunk, telling him I was in love with Julie, I went to the Pole Corral.

"Well, I managed to tell Julie the truth—that she would have to come with me or Spellman would take her by force. Not having a

gun, and being a prisoner, I could not prevent it. I convinced Julie I wasn't drunk at all, and she came. Your mother was upstairs, and while I wanted to tell her the truth so she wouldn't worry, Spellman was waiting impatiently outside the door. I sped away in your new car, which Spellman had stolen. Well, I managed to slow down at a turn and let Julie out of the machine near Chamizal, so she could go to the home of friends and get them to take her back to the ranch."

Then the caravan had proceeded to the border, J. Rufus well in the lead, with Spellman still believing he was carrying Julie as a passenger. Dan was following with Miss Fay in the roadster, and four Double Diamond punchers abandoned their horses and hired another car at the garage and trailed behind.

"Soon as I got into the cantina, I began to pour liquor onto the floor and whoop it up," laughed the tenderfoot. "Having studied the language, I got an earful from the Mexicans in that smuggler's den, both before and after Dan arrived with Miss Fay."

Renshaw chuckled at his ingenuity in staggering about the barroom and getting near enough to hear what Spellman was planning in the booth. "It was when Miss Fay said

she'd go with him to the 'padre,' to save your life, Bravo, that I slipped out and fixed the ignition in his car. No wonder he couldn't get started before the fight in the saloon broke loose; and Miss Fay, seeing that Dan broke the agreement, jumped from the car."

J. Rufus reminded Bravo of his warning in the cantina that a trap had been set. "Then I busted out through the booth, still 'drunk', intending to take a hand in the wedding plans. I knew the car was useless, of course, and Spellman would have a time locating the trouble. When I staggered up, the Old Man was madder than a hornet, both at the car and Miss Fay. "Damn the wretch anyway!" For the first time, the tenderfoot betrayed his feelings over the magnate's designs on the girl.

"Well, I had heard talk in the cantina that a big shipment was due to go through tomorrow night, a bunch of trucks and trailers. Although I was supposed to be polluted, I asked a big fellow, who seemed to know about things, how Dan Spellman, reputed to be wealthy, could be mixed up in a game of this kind. He laughed and said, in Spanish: 'There's millions in it. There's a hundred thousand dollars worth of the contraband going through tomorrow night, and after all expenses are paid Gangway Dan

will take half. There's a shipment going through every week, but usually smaller.'"

The car had reached Montoya, whose scattered adobes lay purple and black in the first glow of the rising moon. Jeffry's machine was not far behind.

"Why the 'Gangway'?" Bravo wanted to know.

"He gangways the stuff through, I suppose. There are some things I don't understand—Dan Spellman is an officer. But to go on with what happened when I found Spellman and Miss Fay in the disabled car. At that juncture a Mexican came hurrying over to the Old Man, and I heard him tell Spellman in Spanish that the shipment had just crossed the line and would be ready to handle tonight. This was unexpected, for it was the hundred-thousand-dollar cargo that was to have gone through tomorrow night."

There were more questions which the tender-foot answered as best he could. He did not know how Dan Spellman had managed to become an officer, but he guessed the magnate had used influence with certain politicians to receive appointment either in the treasury department, in the customs service or as an enforcement officer.

"I can throw some light on that, Rufus," said Miss Fay. "You recall Colonel Lazure, the government man who was at the rancho? He was there the night you made Dan Spellman a prisoner, Bravo Jim. Well, I heard him and Spellman talking one day. Spellman said something about having his lines laid perfectly in Juarez, even claiming to be admitted to the smugglers' ranks. He was posing before Colonel Lazure as a spy on the smugglers, getting information, then passing it along to the enforcement officers to enable them to seize the contraband. But he was playing them false."

"That's mighty interesting," declared Bravo Jim. "Explains how he's been able to get by with this game, working with the smugglers openly. Uncle Sam thinks he's an under-cover man helping to undo the rum runners. In the meantime he's double-crossing the government."

"But how about that battle with the smugglers on the night when the Colonel caught Horse Cabral and Injun Meadows?" Rufus wanted to know. "Dan Spellman helped the Colonel in that fight."

Bravo Jim was forced to give it up. He did not know how soon the whole problem would be brought to a startling issue. The car con-

tinued on into Chamizal, waited for Jeffry's machine containing Ira and Baldy.

Soon the second car appeared. There was a hasty parley. It was decided to proceed straight for Moon Mesa, to interrupt the smuggler caravan. Dan Spellman's machine gun, mounted on the big truck, would have to be met and conquered this night, it seemed certain. Spellman would be using it to get his contraband through. The problem arose as to what to do with Miss Fay, for the hour was late, she had been under great strain, and a return to her boarding place at the Spellman rancho was out of the question.

"We'll have to take her to the Pole Corral, Bravo," said J. Rufus, and walked away to help Jeffry replenish the gas supply.

"I haven't been invited," said the girl, looking at Bravo.

"You know you'd be more than welcome," asserted the ranchman, a little embarrassed by her frankness. "With mother and Julie there, it would be all right." He drew from his pocket a little leather-backed book. "Here is something I wanted to give you, Miss Fay."

It was the diary from which Karg had read the things she had written about the young cowman.

"Have you—looked into it?" she stammered.

"You know I wouldn't do that."

Both were silent. Bravo Jim had suffered the torment of doubt and uncertainty about this girl during the last twenty-four hours. There were times when he had dared to hope. Yet J. Rufus, for whom Miss Fay had come West, had redeemed himself completely, had proved himself loyal to Bravo Jim and the right—had saved Miss Fay in Mexico when the ranchman had failed. And the girl had taken even greater risks for Rufus' sake.

Still the words of the diary came uppermost. She was standing close to Bravo, her large eyes starry as the night. They were alone beside the car in the shadows; the witching moon that had always spelled wild hazard and daring exploit was climbing free of the horizon above the distant mesa. Bravo Jim struggled with the reckless impulse to seize her in his arms, declare the overmastering love that clamored within him.

"You are so quiet. What are you thinking of, Bravo Jim?"

He was awkward and afraid—afraid of himself. He feared almost to have her come to the Pole Corral as a ranch boarder. The

lines of his strong face hardened. "I was thinking how much better it would be if I had never seen you," he said, boldly. "It has meant nothing but misery for me. But I reckon I ought to be glad for Rufus' sake. He's a man, true blue—he's worthy of you."

"I am so glad you think so, Bravo Jim. He is all that you say, and more. I want to go to the Pole Corral because he is there. The only reason I stayed at the Spellman rancho was to help him. But now that he knows I am here it is all right."

"I wish you would marry him right away, Miss Fay—tomorrow——"

There was the swift tattoo of hoofbeats in the street. Ira Estes bounded over from the restaurant, whither he had gone in hope of rousing someone to obtain a sack of doughnuts.

"Karg's in town!" he exclaimed, excitedly. "He's got a big bunch with him—looked like a dozen when they passed the plaza! Likely the rest of them Tehanners and I don't know who else. They must 'a' been layin' for us!"

The steady rhythm of the hoofbeats had broken, ceased. Shadowy forms had taken position on both sides of the thoroughfare, near the little square. Suddenly the riders seemed

to have changed their plan of attack; they turned about and galloped up the street, beyond the plaza, in the direction from whence they had come. The clatter of their mounts abruptly died on the night.

"They're laying for us up there aways," declared Baldy Carr, his wrinkled face grim. "Either we got to fight through 'em or turn back."

CHAPTER XXVII

On the Smuggler Trail

BRAVO'S first thought was of the safety of Miss Fay. "Tom, take her in. Later you can drive her out to the Pole Corral." The cowman jumped into the touring car in which J. Rufus and Baldy had already taken seats. Ira piled into the tonneau with the old foreman.

Careful strategy would have dictated a stand here before the filling station, but every minute was precious if the chief objective was to be gained—the halting of the huge shipment of contraband. Especially was it necessary to go on because Karg's real purpose now was to hold up Bravo Jim and his men from the Moon Mesa expedition. The gunman and his crew doubtless had been posted near Chamizal ready for just such a contingency as the arrival of any of Bravo's party—very likely assigned to this role by the Old Man.

To have gone down the street instead of up would have meant a ten-mile detour around

the valley alfalfa fields and orchards before the mesa trail was reached. Bravo Jim chose to fight his way through conditionally.

"Rufus, it's up to you. Go through 'em if you want to drive—get as low as you can behind the wheel and step on the gas, if you're willing to risk it."

"Risk it!" The tenderfoot kicked to the starter, jumped the car forward in low, changing gears swif'tly and without lights roared up the street to the plaza and beyond. Here the thoroughfare had become a country road, lined with umbrella trees and cottonwoods, whose dense shadows lay across the highway, with here and there a brilliant patchy speckle of moonlight.

The meeting of the two forces was but a matter of a few minutes. Suddenly two lines of horsemen loomed up in the recesses between the trees, their guns blazed and their mounts poured out on two sides of the machine in front. Shattered windshield glass rained about the heads of the crouching figures in the car, and at that instant Rufus threw on the powerful, blinding headlights, to the accompaniment of the crash of guns behind him. Bravo, Ira and Baldy were firing, emptying their pistols as the horses reared and snorted, confused by the

glare of the lights. The Pole Corral men passed the traveling ambushcade in a rush.

At least one of Karg's men had fallen. Baldy vowed he had accounted for six. Ira claimed a like number. They compromised on Bravo's one.

"I hope the hombre that dropped from his hoss was Karg," said Ira.

"I don't believe Karg was among 'em," declared the Pole Corral boss. "When Rufus switched on those lights I saw most of them, and didn't make out anybody in a preacher garb like that gent wears."

"Throwin' the lights on shore played hob with their hosses, which accounts why they didn't drill nary a one uh us," asserted Ira. "Oh, well—now to business." He reloaded his gun. "Danged lucky I thought to bring them ca'tridge belts out uh Tom Jeffry's machine."

"That reminds me," said Bravo, addressing Rufus, "Where did you get the gun you used to fight off that band of smugglers when you and Miss Fay were in the machine down there on the Island?"

"Forgot that," laughed the tenderfoot. "It was funny. Soon as that Mexican came up and tipped Dan off about the shipment going

through tonight, the Old Man begged me to start the stalled car. Well, I staggered around drunkenly, told him sure thing, and put the jinx on that bus for fair. Dan was getting madder every minute. He chased back to another machine, but meanwhile I had slipped his gun out of his holster!"

Rufus chuckled. "He must have discovered it and passed the word along to his crowd to fire on me, but he was in too much of a hurry to come back for his gun. I suppose he knew then that I wasn't bribed after all!" They had reached the forks. "This the Double Diamond road?"

"Right. Better put out the lights, if you can make it in the dark," said the cowman. Rufus promptly shut off the glares.

"What's that? Another car running dark!" exclaimed Rufus, motioning south. Not far away, outlined dimly on the horizon, a machine was traveling. "Lucky we're in the draw—they can't see us."

"It's some of that bunch, taking the news to the Old Man that we got through," asserted Baldy. "We've got those coyotes to fight tonight besides the main smuggler bunch."

"Don't chase 'em," cautioned Bravo Jim. "We'll take our time. They won't suspect

we're headed for the Double Diamond casa, figuring we'll go to the old ore road on the mesa."

"What!" exclaimed Baldy. "We going straight to the house?"

"It won't be far out of the way, if at all," informed Bravo, "and there's a chance we'll run across the ring leaders of this thing there before the contraband train goes through. We'll see. How do you reckon Spellman guessed we'd horn in on this deal tonight, Rufus?"

"He knew it. As soon as that Mexican came up and told him the news about the shipment, not knowing Miss Fay and I could understand the lingo, Dan gritted his teeth, because he was well aware both of us knew Spanish, though he believed he could count on me—until he found I had taken his gun. Because we had heard the Mexican's message was one reason he ordered his smuggler friends to shoot us down. He knew the chances were we'd tell your crowd, if we survived.

"Besides," added Rufus, "Dan guessed you wouldn't start north in a hurry unless you had learned about the shipment and had found Miss Fay. He took a chance and posted his punchers in town, knowing if you did hit

Chamizal near midnight there was a reason."

The car was approaching the old Chaves casa of the Double Diamond. Bravo directed Rufus to drive around to the rear of the peach orchard. There he and Ira jumped out and started for the house to reconnoiter.

In less than five minutes Bravo Jim entered the shadows of the patio, while Ira went to the side of the bunk house. A light was burning in the casa living room, leading off from the patio. The cowman was elated at what he saw there; his hunch had been correct. He listened a space, then entered quickly, with gun in hand.

"Good evening, gentlemen!" he greeted, with grim irony, facing Dan Spellman and a little man wearing smoked glasses—Colonel Lazure. He had just heard the border magnate make a significant remark: "No, Colonel—my information is that the stuff will go through tomorrow night, chiefly maguey, mislabeled, poisonous alcohol. I've found out how the game's worked. It's distilled in Sinaloa from the cactus and cane pulp—hundred and sixty-eight proof—then shipped to Juarez, bottled or canned in the four and a half gallon. It's brought down to a hundred proof and colored and labeled 'Old Crow', 'Cedar Brook', 'Johnny Walker', 'Paul Jones',

'Gordon Dry Gin' and so on. Kind of a joke the way some of the Mexes spell the names." He called the letters: "'Sedar Brook', 'Kintuckey' and the like! Well, there's big money in it—orders from the interior, and this is the only route through from the border. Tomorrow night we'll be on the job."

Now Bravo Jim took a hand: "Gangway Dan has information that the stuff is to be delivered to him tonight, Colonel Lazure. He's got quite a bunch out to handle the situation, ready to battle the revenue men if there's resistance. I'd advise you to get in touch with your officers as soon as possible, because Dan Spellman is playing the government for a piker. Meanwhile have someone keep an eye on Spellman."

"You're dead wrong, Bravo Jim," declared the government man, quietly. "Mr. Spellman's reputation as a citizen and officer does not coincide with what you say. I ——"

He did not finish, for Bravo Jim whirled with the speed of a panther, at the soft tread of a thin-soled shoe behind him. His gun, already drawn, was upon the figure of Anton Karg, black-garbed and crouched. The killer's cadaverous countenance held a hideous look of surprise and chagrin, his hands stiffly held

at his sides, stayed in their motion toward his pair of forty-fives.

"Came here to inform Gangway Dan that we were on the way, did you?" queried Bravo Jim, blithely. "I'm leaving now. I reckon that shipment will need a lot of protection tonight, Karg and Spellman. Good night, Colonel!"

The cowman glided to the patio, still facing the trio in the sala. Out in the night, he turned and sprinted for the car beyond the orchard.

"Reckon I've put a spoke in Dan Spellman's wheel," he chuckled. "What did you see, Ira?" Bravo had sighted his puncher running from the bunk house at the same time he came from the patio.

"They've got that big truck in motion, and the machine gun is all set!" declared Ira. "They're headed over Moon Mesa, right near Puerco cañon!"

"Let's got," invited Bravo, and Rufus sent the touring car on its way.

"I don't reckon Dan will take a hand in this game tonight—personally," chuckled Baldy, after hearing Bravo's account of the meeting in the casa. "If that Colonel is on the square, he'll keep an eye on Gangway Dan, that's a cinch!"

But an hour later all four of the Pole Corral men were to revise their judgment. They were lying in wait near the mouth of the cañon, facing the road leading north—the only avenue of passage west of the impassable White Sands of New Mexico to the inland states. A truck chugged up in the moonlight, then another, and each bore a trailer. Farther down the road more of the rum-running conveyances were moving upward.

“Gosh, it’s light, with that old moon shinin’ down,” remarked Ira. “Why’d yuh figure they’d pick such a night as this? They could ’a’ slipped through easier by comin’ earlier, before the moon was up.”

“That’s why they didn’t,” affirmed Bravo. “They knew well enough the revenue officers go to bed when there’s bright moonlight, believing the rum runners would’nt risk it except when it’s pretty dark.”

They waited for a time, while the caravan neared, their bodies screened behind a large rock.

“In a minute, open fire,” directed Bravo, grimly. “Don’t shoot to hit at first—aim high until we see if they quit. But if they turn loose a machine gun, we’re behind a hefty boulder, and we’ll give ’em our lead. Ira, you move

back and watch for Spellman. That Double Diamond truck is probably with this bunch of smugglers right now, but Spellman and Karg may try to cover from the rear. Now—fire!”

Two pairs of forty-fives broke through the noise of the rumbling caravan.

On the instant, the middle truck responded with the rattle of machine gun fire. Baldy Carr's fingers, just over the edge of rock, smote with the pain of a bullet that had severed one of the digits. He used his other hand, and the three attackers continued to shoot and reload for long minutes, while shot rained about them, splintering the crown of the boulder.

The caravan had halted. So thick had been the bullet shower about the big stone that Bravo, Baldy and Rufus had not been able to sight their quarry with any certainty. But judging the spot whence the machine gun flame showed, they directed their fire at the central truck. Suddenly the rapid-fire instrument rested.

Whether the smugglers had attempted a ruse Bravo Jim could not guess. He raised his eyes above the rock, and made out the faint forms of two men lying prone across the edge of the truck. One of them stirred, toppled over on the ground.

"Come on, boys!" Bravo leaped up and toward the truck. In another minute, with leveled gun, he climbed into the machine. A wounded rum runner begged mercy, groaned with a ball in the shoulder. The other, on the ground, rose and fell again.

"Where's Ira?" asked Bravo, quickly, noting the absence of the rotund puncher.

"He went that way—said he saw something suspicious on the mesa," explained Rufus. "There it is!"

Suddenly out of the night, from the west in the direction of the Double Diamond, an automobile dashed into view in the moonlight. A machine gun tattooed wickedly from a hundred yards, and it continued to spray its lead as the car crept toward the line of contraband-carrying vehicles. Bravo and his two companions flung themselves flat in the gunner truck, behind a row of heavy boxes. Abruptly the firing ceased. Drivers of forward trucks had already fled or were lying amidst their cargoes in hiding. A voice came from the direction of the newly-arrived automobile:

"We are officers of the government. You are under arrest. Those who surrender will walk forward, toward us."

"It's the Colonel!" ejaculated J. Rufus

"Thank Heavens for that! Come on!" He was out of the truck and running.

Bravo Jim and Baldy followed, the latter with a lacerated hand dripping red.

Six men were standing by the officers' car—the Colonel, Dan Spellman, Karg, two unidentified men in civilian garb, and Ira Estes, the latter plainly a prisoner. A seventh manned the machine gun, and he was standing directly behind the mechanism now, as the boss of the Double Diamond gave his sinister command:

"Put up your hands, gentlemen, or you are dead men. Larry, pull that big gat wide open if anybody in this party don't lift his paws overhead—now!"

Bravo might have risked a contest of speed with the man behind the machine gun—and quickness would have decided the issue in spite of the superiority of the bigger weapon in deadliness—but he had no way of knowing whether the gunner was a revenue man under Lazure. He obeyed the command, as did Rufus and Baldy.

"Looks like we'd got 'em at last, Colonel," sang out the border magnate, cheerfully. "Just what I expected to find." With Lazure, he extracted the sheathed guns from the prisoners' holsters.

"Yes, sir," went on Gangway Spellman, brusquely. He gestured to the two unidentified officers. "Better round up any others of those drivers. We'll load what contraband we can on the truck later—it's right behind. Lucky we transferred the machine gun to the car—we made better time. Well, Colonel, I've made good my bet. I've suspected this Bravo Jim Calhoun from the minute I arrived here and leased the old Chaves place to watch him. Even offered him a fabulous price for his Pole Corral, to test him out and see if he'd let loose of it. Of course he wouldn't. No wonder! There's millions in this rum running game—not to mention what diamonds, silks and other contraband crosses the border."

"You lie, Spellman," said Bravo Jim fervently.

"That's what they all say," retorted the magnate. "Well, Colonel, you've seen it. Right here in Puerco cañon, on Pole Corral ground—the biggest smuggling cache discovered in this country for a coon's age, I reckon! And when we found those three punchers, Joe Hillis, Felipe Garcia and Bill Brand, right there guarding the contraband, we had proof enough. Pole Corral hands, those three. No wonder Bravo Jim wouldn't sell his

rancho for a hundred thousand cash! He's located right on the line to the inland states, shortest cut to the north—fact is, that stuff has got to cross Moon Mesa to dodge the Organs and San Andreas Mountains on the one side and the gypsum beds on the other. Moon Mesa is part of the Pole Corral. Wild country, too, part of this old rancho—he figured he could work this trick indefinitely. Well, Anton, you better take this bunch back to Chamizal and lock 'em up. The Colonel and I will stick here with the other boys and clean the slate."

The ghastly face of Karg, faro-dealer, realtor, gunman and killer, registered an unspeakable ecstasy as Colonel Lazure, higher-up officer in the government service, nodded assent to the plan of Spellman. In the glow of the automobile headlights his eyes stared fixedly upon Bravo Jim.

"There's a murder charge pending against this Bravo Jim Calhoun, too," Karg said, smoothly. "He killed one of our men in Chamizal tonight, avoiding arrest. *I'll see that he's locked up in the town jail and given every protection.*"

He stressed the words to recall to Bravo Jim the night when he had been lodged in that jail and the mob had sought to destroy him, after

the cowman's pledge of safety. Plainly he intended to even accounts, though it was unlikely he would indulge the formality of a mob of townsmen. Karg had a mob of his own.

Bravo Jim met the killer's stare with a grim smile. He realized the futility of argument, for he had already informed Lazure of the facts. Spellman and Karg had executed their cover-up well, in the presence of the government man. They had been planning this alibi for themselves for days, in the event their conspiracy to buy the Pole Corral for a base of operations failed, particularly since the arrival here of the higher-up federal investigator. They had even used Hillis, Felipe and Brand to incriminate Bravo Jim; probably had taken these three to some minor bootleg cache for the purpose of "arresting" them in Lazure's presence.

Bravo's jaw squared; his eyes were level upon the lethal orbs of Karg. The killer had prepared the way well for what he was planning to do, charging murder. If there had been murder this night, the outlaw band who raced down Chamizal's street to slay the cowman were guilty—they had merely been worsted at their own game. Bravo's mind worked quickly. A faint chance remained. Thrust in his belt at the rear, out of sight in the darkness, was one

of the guns—now loaded—which had been taken from the smugglers in the Island cantina, one that Bravo Jim had reserved for an emergency such as this.

The chance was faint, indeed. Karg's weapon was in front, in his ready holster, from which he was used to executing the fast draw that had made him notorious, from which he had slain several and disarmed Juan Escajeda, the prize gun-fighter of Chamizal's constable's office. Bravo Jim's weapon was in an unaccustomed place; the reach and draw from behind would be slow, difficult.

Further, Karg was not his only adversary here. Dan Spellman was armed, as was Colonel Lazure. The other officers and punchers handling the contraband were armed. If Spellman and Lazure reached for their weapons at a show of resistance on the part of the prisoner—and Bravo did not doubt they would do so—the situation would be a hard one, for the ranchman could not offer a hostile move against the Colonel, an officer above reproach.

But he made his decision in face of the odds, eyes still level on the ghastly face of the gambler-gunman.

"Come at it, Karg," he invited, sharply. "I've got a pistol on me that you overlooked!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

Facing the Music

HAD Karg sought a favorable opportunity for settling his grudge against the owner of the Pole Corral, he could not have asked for more than this sudden turn of events. By his attitude he had betrayed the fact that he did not intend to lodge Bravo Jim in jail—he would have found a speedy way to dispose of the cowman to prevent further incriminating charges against himself and Spellman. Now the foe had played into his hands by challenging him to a duel, when Bravo's gun was not in its holster!

Bravo was not planning upon suicide, exactly, though he knew the chances were against him. He had in mind a feat attributed to Wild Bill Hickok while marshal of Dodge—a sudden, athletic spring high upward on the instant his antagonist reached for his gun, knowing Karg would shoot for his middle. If he were quick enough the ball would strike him low, in the hip or leg, or go clear altogether, while

Bravo made his draw. It was a beggar's choice; death was certain if Karg were permitted to lead him away to jail.

He realized also that he was playing into the renegade's hands in that Karg might kill him here with a perfect "out," since Bravo was a prisoner, resisting arrest. Even if the gambler was not an officer, Spellman and the Colonel were, together with at least two of the band who had attacked the rum runners' caravan. Thus Karg needed only to make the reach and draw for which he was celebrated and end the story—if Bravo Jim failed to match his fire. The ranchman watched Karg's hand in the bright light of the mesa moon.

But the man in the black hat and frock coat could not resist the temptation to gloat. "You wouldn't shoot to kill, would you, Bravo?" he asked, almost blithely.

"If I did, it wouldn't be shooting a harmless old fellow like Half-Wit Charlie, Karg," returned the cowman, steadily.

"H—m! Gents, it looks like someone was due to get hurt here in a couple of minutes. How long do you figure you'll need to pray, Bravo Jim Calhoun?"

The ranchman's gaze did not waver from the man, but broadly in his range of vision he per-

ceived that Colonel Lazure was backing away slightly in the shadows beside the headlights. The action had followed a shout from the machine gun truck in the road: "All right to close, Colonel!" The words had puzzled Bravo, but he had not time to think of them now. He did not give retort to the gunman's taunt about the prayer. At that instant J. Rufus Renshaw walked quickly toward the Colonel. The tenderfoot shot out impatient words:

"You can't let this go on, Colonel—Bravo doesn't have a chance—and you've got the evidence!"

Startling as this declaration had been, the ranchman knew that only one thing counted now—the speed with which he could perform and reach the hidden gun.

But the strange words of both the officer on the road and J. Rufus had a surprising effect. A glint of metal shone in the shadows in the hand of Lazure, at the instant Bravo gave his lean body an upward spring to the accompaniment of blazing guns in the hand of Karg and the hand of the cowman, followed by a shot from Lazure.

Bravo Jim had been marvelously quick, in spite of the awkward draw, and he came down on his feet and stayed there; while Karg stag-

gered backwards into an arroyo behind the car, and Colonel Lazure reeled and sat down, his gun falling to the sand.

Dan Spellman had leaped to cover into the automobile.

Bravo did not know until afterwards how the shots had been placed; he knew that his swift motion had let the killer's bullet pass idly by, with a tug at his pants at the hip. Karg, after firing the shot that he believed would account for Bravo, had turned the gun with wondrous quickness upon Colonel Lazure as the officer was covering him from the shadows.

Then the ranchman's ball had struck the killer. Swift as Bravo's body had been, his draw had been a trifle slow.

The startling turn of events had been a confession of guilt on the part of both Karg and Spellman, following speedily on the heels of what the officer and J. Rufus had said. The gambler at the moment was in the arroyo, yet Bravo knew the bullet had struck him somewhere in the vitals. Of that the cowman was sure, for he had been able to see his target distinctly.

While J. Rufus dashed toward the Colonel to see the extent of his hurt, Bravo Jim gave attention to Spellman in the car. He jumped

to the side of the machine as it was getting under way, and the border magnate whipped forth his gun and fired.

The ball struck the side of the car and deflected to the ground. Bravo's gun barrel struck the revolver and sent it spinning. Raising the weapon as a club, he bade the Double Diamond boss to get down out of the automobile.

"Right considerate of you not to use that machine gun," remarked the Pole Corral man, looking over the slaughter piece critically. He toyed with the mechanism. "No rum running expedition is complete without one, and every little hi-jacker ought to have several. Come along, and join the party!"

The shooting had brought the two other officers; they scoured the arroyo for Karg. Bravo Jim went with them, but the killer had disappeared!

Now the cowman hurried to Lazure. The government man was standing, gasping to his fellow officers: "His bullet must have rammed my gun into my wind. I don't seem to be scratched." He laughed a bit. "Not punctured, anyway. That rascal Karg tried to get me. He fired at Bravo Jim Calhoun and turned the gun on me almost in one motion."

The Colonel sat down again. "I hope Bravo

shot high, because Karg wears a breast-chain that reaches to his thighs."

"He got away!" exclaimed Baldy Carr, who, with Ira, had been going over the arroyo a second time. In the moonlight they had scoured every foot of the ground within many yards of where Karg had toppled back. If the gunman had been shot in the middle, he could not have taken flight.

"Bravo's lead hit him hard enough to upset him," declared Ira Estes. "That is, hit his breast-plate, if he had one like you say, Colonel. Here's Dan Spellman waiting to hear his fate."

"A forty-five will knock a man thataway," Ira went on. "Baldy, get a gun." He helped himself to the weapon that Bravo had taken from Spellman, and Lazure proffered his other gun to Baldy. The pair started off again, seeking Karg, scarcely knowing just why the Colonel and his officer friends had changed about-face over the smuggling incident. Nor did Bravo Jim understand.

One of the government men explained his part in it. "Soon as that rum runner on the truck—he's shot in the leg and needs looking after—as soon as he said who it was that attacked him in the first place—he didn't know the names, but it couldn't have been us and

had to be Bravo's men — why, I knew your suspicions were right, Colonel. So I gave you the signal."

"What is all this nonsense?" Dan Spellman wanted to know, standing as a prisoner of an armed revenue officer.

Colonel Lazure was on his feet again, and his voice was restored to normal. "I might as well lay my cards on the table, Gangway Dan," he said, quietly. "Hi-jack Dan would be a more appropriate name. I've been checking up for some time with a fellow operative on the Pole Corral. For a while I believed you were on the level, because every time I showed up you suggested a bona fide raid, and even helped me take the contraband.

"But we've got your number at last. There are two more men we need badly — Olquin and Karg — and a few of the smaller fry that will have to answer to charges in court." The government man motioned to J. Rufus. "Better tell Bravo the rest of it, Renshaw."

"Look here!" blurted out Spellman. "You fellows don't seem to realize that I am an officer — enforcement service under-cover man. This frame-up business will go hard with you! Dan Spellman's got some mighty powerful friends from the Pecos west!"

"Including Juarez," said J. Rufus, sarcastically. "This business tonight clears up what I didn't know about you, Spellman. Hi-jack Dan is right. That explains everything. At first the Colonel and I had you marked down as a smuggler—pretending to be working with that big syndicate in Juarez to get the stuff over while you tipped off the American officers. But the Colonel is right when he says we've got your number at last. Plain hi-jacker. Raiding the smugglers. Gathering the loot from the very fellows you pretended to be helping to 'gangway' the stuff across the border for!"

"It's a lie," declared Spellman, hoarsely. "You all will pay for this! I'm a big man in the Southwest—mines, lumber, cattle—got money and wouldn't try any game like this for a measly little bootleg——"

"A hundred thousand at a clip," laughed the tenderfoot. "Sometimes diamonds, art works, antiques, even Parisian gowns stuck in with the shipment on a percentage basis! That right, Colonel?"

"Exactly. Mexico has got to be a popular round-about way for stuff that can't be smuggled in from the Atlantic or the west coast, including narcotics. We'd trace the shipments,

set out our trap, and follow them up east of the Rio Grande. Then we would find a bunch of empty trucks and maybe pinch a bunch of smugglers. They all had the same story—they'd been hi-jacked near Puerco cañon on Moon Mesa—on Pole Corral ground.

"No wonder you were so anxious to get hold of the Calhoun property, Dan," he went on. "You might have got by with that hidden cave for years, right on Bravo's land, because it was out of sight and in a region Bravo very seldom rode over. The cave was worth a lot to you, as a storage place for your hi-jacked loot—maybe for a fancy still of your own, too. But the chief reason you wanted to buy out Bravo was to get him and his cowboys off this range, so there wouldn't be any danger of him blundering onto your game. Then when you saw that Bravo couldn't be forced to sell, at any price, you took the next best course to get him out of the way. Well, you didn't succeed!"

"Thanks largely to you, Rufus," asserted Bravo Jim, fervently. "I reckon the Colonel and these officers can take care of Hi-jack Dan and these other prisoners, the Mexican and gringo smugglers that were hurt on those trucks. If so, we'll see if we can head off Karg. He's afoot, so there's no mighty hurry."

Bravo replenished the empty chamber of his forty-five with a new shell, thrust the gun in its holster. "Colonel, what was that Spellman said about showing you Hillis, Felipe and Brand, and where did you find my punchers?"

"They're under arrest. Two of Gangway's Texas hired men brought them in with a little load of contraband liquor—stuff Dan had hidden out after one of his hi-jack raids, I suppose. We'll see that your cowboys are released today." He called to Rufus, "I may need your help, Renshaw, to locate a lot of the stuff that hasn't yet been found. I suppose it's in that big cave."

"That's easy. I'll lead you to it in Puerco cañon," laughed the tenderfoot—"a couple underground cliff dwellings loaded with it. This hi-jack bunch after stealing the stuff from the smugglers hauled it up north of the cañon and let it down by a clever block-and-tackle arrangement that they could then drag out of sight. When the time came, Dan Spellman and his bunch were ready to make deliveries north and east, but the time never came."

The border magnate laughed easily. "What did you mean, Calhoun," he queried, "when you said Karg was afoot and there wasn't any hurry about capturing him?"

"I know where he is, Spellman."

"Where?"

"Not very far away," drawled the cowman.
"And not hurt a bit, either."

Dan Spellman chuckled deeply, raised his voice. "Gents, if your eyes are good and you'll look in that automobile, you'll see Anton Karg manning a machine gun. He's had some trouble getting it fixed to fire, but he's all ready now, and——"

There was a quick rush to the right and left in the eerie light of the mesa, and most of those who had seen the man in the black hat behind the gun kept right on running. Dan Spellman was among them, though he had not fled from fright. It had given him an opportunity to attempt escape.

Of all those who had been in front of the automobile Bravo Jim Calhoun alone remained, his eyes on the faintly revealed ghastly features of Karg. He did not attempt to run.

CHAPTER XXIX

The Right to Speak

“WELL, Bravo, I’ve got my finger on the trigger of Little Bertha,” announced Karg, blithely. “Now let’s see you try that dancing, jumping, dodging stunt again! These babies were made for that kind of thing! Hands up!”

The cowman showed his teeth. He did not raise his hands.

Bravo had his reasons. He had got his first close look at the death-dealing gun that had slain his cattle and waylaid the rum runners’ caravans, within the last few minutes, when he had overpowered Dan Spellman in the automobile—the car, by the way, that had been furnished Gangway Dan unwittingly by the smugglers at the Island. The machine gun had been held somewhere about the Double Diamond, and although Ira had reported it mounted on the truck, it had been changed to the faster traveling automobile since.

When Bravo had seen the weapon and sub-

dued Spellman in the car, he had recognized it as a Lewis gun, especially equipped with small-legged tripod. He had seen the flat, plate-like circular magazine. The smuggler's truck, on the other hand, had been equipped with the first Browning-model Colt, air-cooled, fed by a belt at the breech.

The nature of the gun was inconsequential, except that Bravo had yielded to the temptation the circular magazine had offered—he had emptied it and placed it again on the spindle. And he knew now that the gambler's threat behind the weapon was sheer bluff.

Karg, of course, knew the gun. Bravo had watched him carefully; he had made sure the would-be assassin had not replaced the magazine. Now he gave the gunman something to think about:

“This time, Karg, we're even. Sort of dark where you're standing, true enough. But I've been watching you ever since you climbed into the car out of the arroyo. That magazine on the spindle is empty. You made a mistake in not using your six-shooter over the edge of the arroyo—figured you'd clean out the Colonel, Rufus and the rest of us all at one crack, eh? Well, I'm waiting.”

The man's unnatural pallor gave him a

ghost-like appearance in the moonlight, and his voice carried out the semblance of unreality: "I hate to kill you, Bravo, because it'll be so dead easy. You don't know that I put in a new magazine, I suppose. This little twenty-seven-pound gun will shoot seven hundred rounds a minute. All I have to do is to reach my hand forward and pull the trigger, and the Lewis will fill you full of holes——"

"If you aim it right, and if it's got shells in the magazine," laughed Bravo. "Now, that chain body-guard you're wearing around you, Karg——"

The killer went down flat under the cowl of the car, and his hand flashed up with his frontier-model forty-five, discarding the called bluff that this time he was banking upon the Lewis gun alone. Bravo Jim's eye, arm, wrist and fingers responded on the instant. He saw the flame of his adversary's weapon belch upward, for Bravo's ball had struck either the hand or the gun at the identical moment of discharge. There was a pistol roar from the left, then another and another.

Colonel Lazure ran forward, his revolver in hand. Bravo Jim sprinted toward the car and its occupant, weapon likewise advanced. He was taking no chances, for he could not see

whether Karg's gun had been knocked from his fingers.

Bravo and Lazure reached the automobile at the same moment. One glance at the huddled form within, and the two men looked at each other.

"Car door was open on this side, where he got in, and I could see him crouching and trying to kill you, Bravo. He had tried to shoot me. I couldn't help letting him have it above that body-shield."

"Where's Spellman?" asked the cowman, quickly.

"He ran full-tilt into a bunch of my men trailing this caravan; I was just going to let him have it when I saw they'd grab him. Here he comes."

A machine was proceeding along the mesa road with lights off-switch. Five heavily-armed men of the border patrol got out. They had forced Dan Spellman to walk ahead of the machine up the road. "Who is this hombre, and what was the shootin'?" one of the newcomers wanted to know.

"Boys, meet Gangway Dan Spellman, king of hi-jackers," said Lazure. "I'm dog-tired. Dave, I wish you and the other boys would look after this mess. Bravo, take me to the

Pole Corral, will you, so I can get an hour or two of sleep?" The Colonel looked more than tired.

Dan Spellman was starting toward the car in which Anton Karg had made his last gun-play. "Is he done for?" he asked Lazure.

Reading the Colonel's nod, the border capitalist turned to the officers and delivered a speech typical of the man. "Boys, I don't like to say it, but I'm glad Karg is done. Yes-sir, I was afraid of that hombre myself—shows what a man of my standing will get himself into through bad associations. I'm through. I'm going to make a stiff defense, and I expect cooperation from you boys. We're all Texans—most of us are, anyway. Yes-sir, it shows what a man will do. Things were quiet in my line—cattle, lands, mines. Like many another man, I yielded to the temptation of big, easy money. I staked what cash I could raise on this game. I reckon I'd have got by, somehow, if it wasn't for this hombre Karg. He got me in bad from the start—I'd have been able to buy the Pole Corral for fifty thousand, a fair price for the outfit, if it hadn't been for Karg——"

"He can't defend himself. Ring off," cut in a sarcastic officer.

"Well, boys, I'm plumb sorry I violated my oath—sorry for the men that used their influence to get me into the service. No use crying over spilled milk. I aim to turn state's evidence—if I can make a deal. To show my heart is right, I'll lead you to the big cache where I've been hauling the stuff—up in that old cliff dwelling mentioned by Renshaw. Also I aim to give the government the real low-down on the Juarez syndicate. I'm valuable to Uncle Sam yet. I reckon we can make a deal."

"The only deal you can make with Uncle Sam will be a term in the penitentiary," declared Colonel Lazure in disgust. "Boys, look after him and those poor devils Jim and Henry have been doctoring in the truck. They'll live, and serve sentences. I'm dog-tired—let's hit for the rancho."

Bravo Jim started with Rufus, Baldy and Ira for the car in which they had come, his own new bullet-marred touring-model, inviting the Colonel to ride with him. In spite of the officer's fatigue, the cowman took time to drive up around the north rim of Puerco cañon, following the deep ruts of a road made by recent trucking activities.

"We'd have found these tracks sooner or

later," commented Bravo. "Which explains why Spellman was so anxious to get us away from the rancho."

The newly-made road led to the top of the north pinnacle over the cañon, where, under an up-ended ledge of rock, the ropes and pulleys and ladders had been secreted by the hijacker gang. In the first light of dawn Bravo dropped the rope ladder, descended and swung over to the mouth of the cave. He fastened the hemp to the spike, entered the old cliff house, and found a lantern, which he lighted. Ira and Rufus were soon down in the cavern, and Colonel Lazure made a descent a little later. Baldy remained above, nursing the wounded hand, crudely bandaged since the battle with the smugglers.

Back in the cave they found tier on tier of alcohol cans, cases of bottled liquors, labels and a recently-fitted up workshop for rehandling the stolen contraband. "They would have had ten times this much in here in a few months," asserted Rufus.

"They had just got nicely started," agreed the Colonel.

The party drove home in the gorgeous rays of the rising sun. At the rancho Deputy Constable Juan Escajeda was waiting. He in-

formed Bravo Jim that Karg had accused the cowman of shooting one of the riders in Chamizal during the night and Karg would make trouble if Juan didn't take some action. The realtor's quick draw that had worsted Juan's reputation as a gun-fighter had cowed the deputy completely.

"Karg's through," informed Ira. "Besides, who was the hombre I potted?"

"*You* didn't pot him," grumbled Baldy Carr. "It was me."

"Who was he, Juan?" Bravo Jim insisted.

"Spellman's foreman—Big Olquin."

"It sure must have been *me*," averred Bravo, gravely.

Deputy Constable Juan Escajeda had suddenly lost interest, and left.

Bravo walked aside with Renshaw. "The women folks haven't got up yet, Rufus," said the cowman, almost dolefully. "I reckon Miss Fay and you will stay on here for quite a spell?"

"Gosh, why the long face, Bravo," laughed the tenderfoot. "I think I'm a new man now, but I want to stick it out for another few months—then maybe get married and go back into law."

"That's what I wanted to mention to you,

Rufus. That marrying business. I'd be mighty pleased if you and she would go to the parson right off. It would be a mite easier for some of the other boys. Every puncher around the place will be wanting to propose to her."

The young tenderfoot stared at him. "You joking? Let's talk about something else. You asked me how I became a federal officer, and why." J. Rufus smiled genially. "After I left New York to get away from that bootleg poison and landed away out here on the desert—arid belt," he chuckled, "the first thing I found out was that I had jumped from the frying pan into the fire—the stuff was literally pouring over the border into the states. That's how a big part of it reached us in New York. It made me mad. I wired an influential friend in Washington—one who did not know how wild I'd been of late—and got into the service. I hit for your Pole Corral on the tip that the Rum Gangway ran right through here, narrowing down in an area that was the only route north due to the White Sands of New Mexico."

"Tell me one thing, Rufus. Why did Miss Fay trail you out here after she broke the engagement back East?"

Renshaw laughed, walked away. He scratched his head, strode back. "I'm really

anxious to marry immediately, Bravo—if I thought my probation period had been sufficient. Would you actually advise it and will you help me?”

“After what you’ve done, tonight and before, I’m certainly obliged, Rufus. But I’m a poor hand with women.”

“A good enough hand,” said Renshaw, rather sharply. “To make a girl write a diary like hers after one brief meeting in a real estate office!”

“Don’t josh me about that matter,” said Bravo, grimly. “I know when I hold a losing hand.” He went into the bunk house, whither he had sent his tired foreman and Ira, and lay down to sleep after his long hours of wakefulness. He had chosen the men’s quarters rather than the ranch house so that he would avoid meeting the girl guest from the East.

In the afternoon he rose, ate in the cook house, mounted with rifle and quietly departed with his wolf dogs. Through the evening he sought the trail of the stock-killing lobos.

Later in the night after the moon came up over the mesa-line his dogs picked up the fresh scent and the chase began. In the small hours of the morning his rifle cracked, and the female lobo fell. The dogs ran about wildly and non-

sensically, their zest satisfied, losing the trail of the male.

He did not seek the wolf lair longer, nor bother to save the pelt of the great beast he had slain. These things seemed futile now—worse than futile, for a feeling akin to sorrow came to him as he looked at the hairy hulk in the sand. He had robbed the lobo of his mate. Strange the meanings of life and its mysteries. Adventure? Romance? He had had both since the night by the campfire when those things had seemed so far away, of another more heroic time. What had all the risk, the victory, the furor availed him? At last the mournful note of the lobo drifted from the mountain-side, fitting the mood of the man. There was kinship here.

He breathed deeply of the cool, crisp air, his lungs expanding, his blood tingling with the feel of super-fitness and hardihood. He longed for conquest, for an antagonist worthy of his strength—ah, if Rufus had been a foe instead of friend! His soul cried out in protest, for Bravo was from a jealous southern strain. Here on this same moonlit mesa from time immemorial even the wild stallions had done battle, often to the death, for the favor of their mares. Always to the fittest had gone the prize.

But man was different. Who could say that Rufus, physically under par, was not fittest? That after all was for someone else to decide. The ranchman's jaw was set. By what right was Bravo Jim Calhoun dictating to Miss Fay that she must choose the tenderfoot? It was the prerogative of the woman to say. He would speak to Rufus frankly and honorably, and each would abide by her choice. If Rufus won her, as Bravo believed the plucky tenderfoot would, then he would have no other feeling than the friendship that had ripened swiftly between them.

Back at the rancho in the morning he laid the matter before the tall Easterner. Rufus listened in silence, his features grave. After a time he could contain himself no longer; he brought down his fist upon the back of his friend with a resounding thud. "Bravo, I'd give anything if I had a diary like that written by your sister!"

The cowman was taken aback. His eyes glinted. "You're not doing the right thing by Miss Fay, Rufus, in saying that."

Another resounding slap was the answer. Renshaw laughed heartily. "I've got to tell you," he declared. "It's you and Fay for it. Bravo, I didn't know she was out here until I

met her in the cave. She came here to keep an eye on me—and even she didn't know I was a government man. Well, when we kissed each other in the cave and that scoundrel Karg read you part of her diary, Fay made me promise we'd go on with the deception about being sweethearts. It wouldn't do for a girl like her to admit that she was in love with you, when you hadn't said a word to her after that first meeting, would it?"

"Are you loco—or what?" Bravo Jim wanted to know.

"Neither!" Again the hearty laugh. "Because Fay withheld her full name, to keep me from discovering she was watching me, it was easy! Man, now you keep this a secret. Fay's my sister— Fay Renshaw. She loves you. Now you go get me another sister's secret something like that, and we're square!"

Julie and Fay Renshaw were coming from the ranch house, arm in arm.

"If you tell that now, I'll wring your neck," promised Rufus. "You go ahead and bait her—she deserves it!"

Bravo Jim's head was in a whirl—a very pleasant whirl. He saw Julie run to Rufus, and a vision of light and happiness turn to him.

There were many mesa moons in the nights

to come, moons that spelled romance and tranquillity for Fay and Bravo as they rode the silvered tableland together when the wind was high.

THE END

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